

NEW

# DEFINING BATTLES of the FIRST WORLD WAR

The campaigns and conflicts that shaped  
the course of **the Great War**



Digital  
Edition



FOURTH  
EDITION



RACE TO THE SEA • BRUSILOV OFFENSIVE • VERDUN • THE SOMME • VITTORIO VENETO







Welcome to

# DEFINING BATTLES of the FIRST WORLD WAR

On 25 December 1914, the trenches along the Western Front fell silent. For one miraculous day, foes turned into friends, with sworn enemies swapping cigarettes, playing football and telling jokes.

By 26 December, thousands of these men lay slaughtered where they'd mingled the day before, any hopes of a war over by Christmas abandoned. In almost four and a half years of conflict, no such truce happened again.

Over the course of the following pages, uncover the pivotal skirmishes of the Great War, from Marne to Megiddo. Discover how the Gallipoli campaign shaped the war, find out how the Somme became the bloodiest battle in history, and learn why the Hundred Days Offensive came to end the bloodshed.

「 FUTURE 」



# DEFINING BATTLES of the FIRST WORLD WAR

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bookazine series





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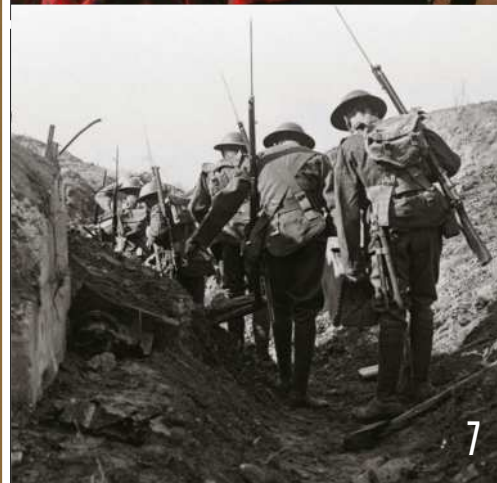






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28 June 1914

# WHAT CAUSED THE *20 defining moments that*

When Gavrilo Princip opened fire on Archduke Franz Ferdinand, he killed not just the heir to the Austrian throne, but sentenced to death over 9 million people in four years. But if assassination was the excuse, it wasn't the cause...





# GREAT WAR?

## *led to World War I*





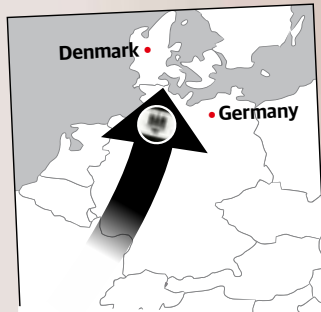
1 February 1864

## PRINCE EDWARD NURSES A GRUDGE

British foreign policy is redefined after the Prussian invasion of Denmark

Prussia and Austria's devastating seizure of the ethnically mixed territories of Schleswig and Holstein, which separated Denmark from what is now Germany, shocked the young British Prince Edward – the future King Edward VII – who was only months into his marriage to Alexandra of Denmark. The pair openly supported the Danes in the conflict in spite of an increasingly pro-German Queen Victoria, Edward's mother.

This conflict, the Second Schleswig War – coupled with his cold relationship with his mother – formed the bedrock of Edward VII's foreign policy, and he cultivated a staunchly pro-French and anti-German clique that would survive in government long after his death in 1910. Under Edward VII's influence, the Royal Navy was reformed and modernised to counter the growing German navy, and Britain's aloof isolation slipped away in favour of treaties with France and Russia that would one day become the Triple Entente, dragging the United Kingdom and its empire into war.



Prince Edward VII and Queen Alexandra in 1896



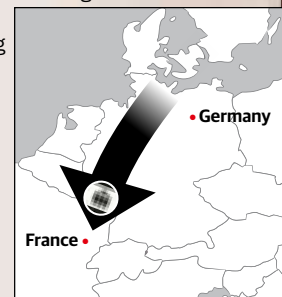
French soldiers in the Franco-Prussian War

19 July 1870

## GERMANY UNITES AT FRANCE'S EXPENSE

Believing "a Franco-Prussian War must take place before a united Germany was formed", Otto von Bismarck goaded France into attacking. The French defeat brought down the Second French Empire of Napoleon III – the monarch was captured along with the remainder of his army – and a vast Prussian occupation of huge swathes of France until war reparations were paid.

This humiliation, along with the annexation of the valuable and heavily industrialised Alsace-Lorraine border region became a huge national tragedy. It remained at the heart of French culture in the run-up to World War I, as foreign affairs revolved around preparing for a new conflict with Germany, and public opinion called for the return of the lost provinces. In the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian War, the North German Confederation was dissolved and replaced by a unified German Empire, led by Kaiser Wilhelm I and Chancellor Von Bismarck, while the French Third Republic formed in Paris.



8 February 1867

## THE OLD EMPIRE CRASHES DOWN

The Austrian Empire is replaced by the Dual Monarchy

A dispute between the traditional guiding hand of the Germanic states – Austria, whose Habsburg family had ruled since 1278 – and the increasingly powerful Kingdom of Prussia – under Prime Minister Otto von Bismarck and King Wilhelm I – allowed the growing rivalry between the two powers to bubble to the surface in open war.

Left weakened and with Hungary set to break away, the Austrian Empire was dissolved in favour of a cumbersome Dual Monarchy of Austria-Hungary, in which each state was governed independently and then together by a convoluted system of joint-ministers. This

solution to Austria's internal instability in turn created a whole new set of stress points in the vast edifice, including Hungary's oppressive policies towards its non-Hungarian subjects, made them easy prey to Serb and Russian-sponsored agitation that would prove so toxic in Austrian-run Bosnia in 1914.

With Austria's traditional dependencies, the myriad small German principalities, now under the banner of one Prussian-dominated North German Confederation, Austria-Hungary had to look toward the Balkans and the waning Ottoman influence for opportunities to expand.

Prussian and Austrian cavalry face off at the Battle of Königgrätz, resulting in a decisive Prussian victory





20 March 1890

## BISMARCK IS FORCED INTO RETIREMENT

German foreign policy turns belligerent as the Kaiser takes over

Though Otto von Bismarck's role in the birth of the German Empire and a renewed enmity with France left him with a reputation for belligerence, the 'Iron Chancellor' was a stabilising force for central Europe. He kept Germany back from the rush for colonies that would bring it into direct competition with other powers, declaring in 1876 that a war in the Balkans wouldn't be worth "the healthy bones of a single Pomeranian musketeer". He also signed the Reinsurance Treaty with Russia in 1887 that limited their involvement in conflicts with each other.

Wilhelm II succeeded his father, Kaiser Frederick III, with a very different set of priorities and the two clashed constantly, the toxic atmosphere in the

court, eventually forcing Bismarck to resign in 1890. His replacement – Leo von Caprivi – was far more in step with Wilhelm's vision, fatally letting the Reinsurance Treaty lapse – pushing Russia towards France – in favour of a friendship with Great Britain that would never truly come to fruition, leaving Germany isolated in Europe by 1914.



German chancellor Otto von Bismarck in the year he left office

10 July 1898

## BRITAIN AND FRANCE SIZE EACH OTHER UP

The scramble for Africa reached crisis point as France and Britain coveted control of the Nile to link up their African colonies. France especially felt threatened by Britain's occupation of Egypt in 1882 and quickly dispatched a small force to Fashoda (now Kodok in south Sudan) where the lines of both powers' empires intersected.

After a daring 14-month trek across Africa, the French force seized Fashoda on 10 July 1898, however reinforcements turned back, and a flotilla of British gunboats led by imperialism's posterboy, Horatio Herbert Kitchener, arrived at the isolated fort – both sides politely insisting on their right to be there, and rather nobly agreeing to fly British, French and Egyptian flags over the fort in compromise. At home,

meanwhile, talk of war gripped both parliaments – only when it looked as though victory would hinge on sea-power, putting the lighter, faster French fleet at the mercy of the heavier British one, did the French withdraw and an official boundary was agreed between the two.

The normalisation of British and French relations after the Fashoda Incident, and the clear demarcation of influence, relieved the constant pressure between the two to an extent, setting them off from hundreds of years of semi-regular bloodshed on a new course towards alliance.

French Captain Marchand at Fashoda in 1898



29 December 1895

## GERMANY IS WARNED OFF IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

Though the competing British and German interests around what is now South Africa had been a clear flashpoint for decades, the British Cape Colony's failed raid on the independent Transvaal Republic that would eventually lead to the Boer War – though unsanctioned by Britain – received the motherland's firm backing.

Kaiser Wilhelm II drafted a letter of congratulation to Boer president Paul Kruger that was celebrated by the German press and sparked outrage in its British counterparts. Germany's urbane ambassador to London was shocked when the Foreign Office's bullish Sir Francis Bertie informed him that wiping out the German navy would be "child's play for the English fleet".

Very much aware of their limitations, their political isolation and of Britain's overreaction, Wilhelm II resolved to increase the power of the German Imperial Navy and to treat Britain no longer just as a potential ally but also as a potential threat.

Transvaal president Paul Kruger in 1898



4 January 1894

## FRANCE AND RUSSIA JOIN FORCES

France and Russia form a modern military alliance

A less likely love affair it would be difficult to imagine: democratic republican France and archaic autocratic imperial Russia cosy up despite public outcry in both of the countries.

France felt encircled by Britain and Germany who were enjoying a rare cosiness at this point, while likewise Russia saw itself threatened by the British Empire in central Asia, and the Far East, and by Germany's allies Austria-Hungary in Europe.

Where past treaties were agreements between governments designed to keep them from interfering in each other's business, this was primarily a military pact with a guaranteed military response if the other was attacked.

With no room for ambiguity, the Franco-Russian Alliance was the first of many that would bind the military powers of Europe together like mountain climbers, just waiting for one to fall and the rest to go tumbling after.



The Avenue Nicholas II in Paris, named in honour of the Franco-Russian Alliance



11 June 1903

## THE BLACK HAND STRIKES

Austro-Serbian friendship dies with Serb king at hands of secret society

In a scandal that shocked all of Europe, Serbia's deeply unpopular and pro-Austrian king Alexander Obrenovi and his wife were murdered by a cabal of army officers who forced their way into the palace and roused the royal couple from their hiding place.

Perpetrated by the Black Hand, a radical nationalist secret society dedicated to absorbing 'Serb' lands (whether Bosnian, Macedonians or Croats) liked it or not) from the rule of the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires, the Black Hand were already so entrenched in Serbia's powerful military that the new government refused all foreign diplomatic pressure to have them arrested for fear they'd be the next rulers to be brutally murdered. One of the key conspirators – Dragutin 'Apis' Dimitrijevi – would later become the leader of the Black Hand



A French illustration of the May Overthrow

and Serbia's head of military intelligence – a powerful combination that would allow him to organise a failed attempt on the life of Austro-Hungarian Emperor Franz Josef in 1911, and a more successful and infamous attack on Franz Ferdinand three years later.

31 March 1905

## THE KAISER PAYS A VISIT TO TANGIER

Germany's attempt to drive a wedge between Britain and France fails

Keen to test the extent of France and Britain's Entente Cordiale – signed 8 April 1904 and putting an end to colonial rivalry in Africa and Asia – Wilhelm II arrives in Tangier to deliver a speech in favour of Moroccan independence – much to the chagrin of France, who planned to take over Morocco as a protectorate.

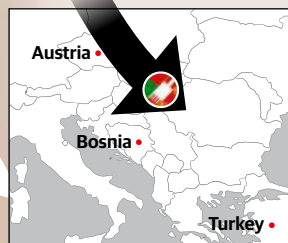
The Kaiser expected to use the ensuing conference to resolve the situation as an opportunity to magnanimously grant France limited control, bringing them closer to Germany and isolating Britain, but to his surprise British foreign secretary, Sir Edward Grey, backed the French in the strongest possible terms, and it's Germany that, once again, came away isolated. The Tangier Crisis paved the way for the Agadir Crisis in 1911, which despite higher stakes – a German gunship off the coast, and French and Spanish troop deployments on Morocco's streets – the German aims were the same, and so were the results: Franco-British military dependency increased, as did the French hold on Morocco and Germany's political encirclement.



A 1905 Punch cartoon showing Wilhelm II as an unlikely friend of Morocco



A French illustration shows Austrian emperor Franz Josef tearing Bosnia from Turkey



6 October 1908

## AUSTRIA TAKES BOSNIA

Austro-Hungarian troops had been in the Ottoman province of Bosnia and Herzegovina since 1878 running it in all but name. In a series of letters and a six-hour secret meeting, Russian foreign minister, Alexander Izvolsky, and Austro-Hungarian foreign minister, Alois Aehrenthal, agreed a revision to the treaty of 1878, allowing Austria-Hungary full control of Bosnia. When the Austrians announced their intent Izvolsky acted as outraged as the rest of Europe's political movers and shakers (but not nearly as outraged as Serbia) and only when Vienna threatened to release secret records proving Izvolsky's duplicity did Russia back down and force Serbia to accept the annexation.

This affair prompted a shift in the direction of Serbian nationalism and public outrage that had so far been more preoccupied with Macedonia and Kosovo. Italy, meanwhile – part of the Triple Alliance with Austria-Hungary and Germany – had been promised territory on the Croatian coast if Austria were to take Bosnia. Affronted, the Italian government would cite this breach of trust when they joined WWI on the side of the Triple Entente in 1915.

5 September 1905

## JAPAN CHECKS RUSSIAN COLONIALISM

Imperial Russia's colonial ambitions in Asia finally overreached themselves, and the Japanese launched a devastating night attack on 8 February 1904 against the fleet anchored at Port Arthur (now Lüshunkou).

This blow to Russia not only brought the Tsarist autocracy to the brink with the Revolution of 1905, but forced Russia to look to the west to expand its influence. The factions in the imperial court fixated on increasing Russia's influence over the Slavic and Orthodox Christian nationalities were strengthened, and foreign policy became increasingly fixated on Bulgaria and Serbia especially. The desire to gain control over the Turkish Straits which would allow the Russian fleet in the Black Sea access to the Mediterranean also grew.





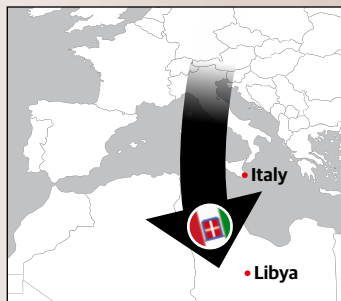
29 September 1911

## ITALY STARTS A FEEDING FRENZY

Italy invades Libya and kicks off the First Balkan War

Though Britain and France had carved off Egypt and Morocco from the fringes of the Ottoman Empire, Italy's sudden invasion of Libya – one of the empire's central provinces – stunned the world. The superior technology of the Italians and their use of air reconnaissance saw them quickly take key cities before becoming bogged down in guerrilla warfare and counterattacks, while the brutal naval assault on the Dodecanese – the southernmost Greek islands – bloodied the Turks and forced them on the defensive.

While it kicked off a chain reaction (goaded on by the Russian ambassador to Belgrade) in the Balkans that led to the First Balkan War, the Italian seizure of Libya demonstrated a shift in Italy's foreign relations away from its traditional allies. Rather than consult its Triple Alliance partners Germany and Austria-Hungary – both invested in the integrity of the Ottoman Empire – they cleared the campaign with France and Britain beforehand instead.



Italian artillery near Tripoli, Libya, in 1911

21 January 1912

## FRANCE VOTES 'OUI' FOR NATIONALISM

Voted in on a wave of nationalism following the Agadir Crisis in July 1911, hardline anti-German prime minister Raymond Poincaré presided over a lurch to the right. Made president the following year he consolidated control of foreign policy and the Higher Council of War, and dispatched veteran statesman Théophile Delcassé – dubbed “the most dangerous man for Germany in France” by Wilhelm II – as ambassador to Russia to better co-ordinate Franco-Russian military strategy.

As Poincaré's government prepared for war, he made it more likely, telling Russian ambassador, Alexander Izvolsky, that any conflict with Austria-Hungary arising from the First Balkan War would have France's backing.

The hawks in the French government calculated that not only would a war over the Balkans be the surest guarantee that Russia would commit all of its forces to the field, but an Austro-Hungarian invasion of Serbia would bog down the Dual Monarchy, leaving the allies free to tackle Germany.



Raymond Poincaré, president of France between 1913 and 1920, and prime minister three times from 1912 to 1929

12 February 1912

## ANGLO-GERMAN ARMS TALKS SINK

Negotiations for a cap on boat building are rejected

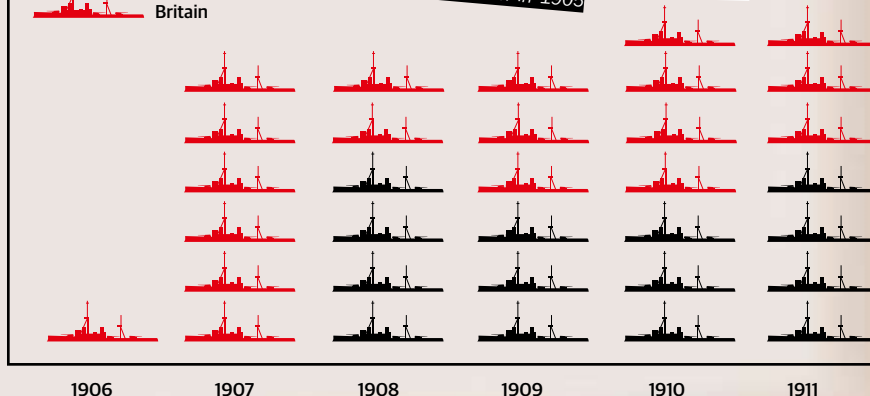
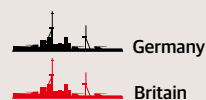
With both powers exhausted by boat-building fever that had formed the backbone of Britain's national self-esteem and the key German status as its equal, the war secretary, Richard Haldane, paid a secret visit to Berlin to try and halt the escalation.

The balance of national egos was simply too fragile. Germany wanted a guarantee of British neutrality in any future conflict, and Britain saw its own naval superiority as something they didn't have magnanimously gifted by Germany in exchange.

As a result, Haldane returned empty handed, the naval buildup continued unabated and, more importantly, Germany pushed Britain further into a military death-grip with Russia and France.

### THE NAVAL ARMS RACE

Battle cruisers built per year



HMS Dreadnought under construction in 1905



30 September 1912

## RUSSIA FLEXES ITS MILITARY MUSCLE

As the First Balkan War gets underway, Russia points its guns towards Austria

With the Balkan League of Serbia, Bulgaria, Greece and Montenegro gearing up to snatch territory from the Ottoman Turks in the wake of Italy's invasion of Ottoman-held Libya the year before, their great protector – Russia – made its stance clear.

If Austria-Hungary was alarmed by this potential shakeup of the borders, the rapid mobilisation of 50,000-60,000 Russian reservists along the Polish border with Austria-Hungary alarmed them more. This was the first major aggressive move by Russia against its rivals, breaking with the tradition of covert deal-breaking that would foreshadow the events of 1914, and the robust defence of Serbia that would swallow much of the planet in war.

Russian foreign minister, Sergei Sazonov, observed that were it to come to conflict, "We can probably rely on the real support of France and England."



Russian foreign minister from 1910 to 1916, Sergei Sazonov

14 December 1913

## CONSTANTINOPLE LOOKS TO GERMANY

Russia's lust for the Turkish Straits may have been pushed to second place during the Balkan wars, but they hadn't lost sight of their long-term goal. The arrival of Otto Liman von Sanders' German military mission on 14 December 1913 to train and command the first corps of the Ottoman army following humiliating Turkish defeats in the Balkans gave them even greater cause for concern than the presence of a British admiral doing the same job with the Ottoman navy.

Though Germany compromised heavily to keep the diplomatic crisis from boiling over (which in turn left the Germans with a sense of resentment), Russia's lack of backing from even the ardently anti-German Delcassé was a potent reminder to Russia that, despite the Triple Entente, its allies had very different priorities.

Viewing for the first time Germany – and not just Austria-Hungary – as a direct threat to Russia's aims, they realised that the only way they could gain control of the Turkish Straits would be against the backdrop of a wider European war, in which France and especially Britain were bound to Russia.



Liman von Sanders pictured with his Ottoman staff officers in 1914

17 October 1913

## SERBIA DIGS IN OVER ALBANIA

The Second Balkan War teaches Austria the value of brute force

The success of the Balkan League in the First Balkan War alarmed Austria-Hungary no end. Now the Second Balkan War had begun, with each combatant eager to consolidate its gains. Serbia – the chief cause of their anxiety – had won crushing victories in Macedonia and then marched into Albania and Kosovo to hold vast swathes of territory. Reports of massacres followed, and even rumours that the Austro-Hungarian consul in Prizren, Kosovo, had been abducted and castrated.

Alternately claiming ignorance of any occupation and then lying about withdrawal, Austria-Hungary grew convinced that Serbia couldn't be bargained with and would only respond to force. On 17 October 1913, Austria-Hungary gave Serbia eight days to leave the contested territory or they would face military action, and Russia advised them to do as they were told. By 26 October Albania was free of Serbian troops and the success of the Albanian ultimatum – and the demonstration of a clear limit to Russia's support – would lead Vienna to try and repeat the performance in 1914, with very different consequences.



Serbian soldiers in Macedonia during the Second Balkan War

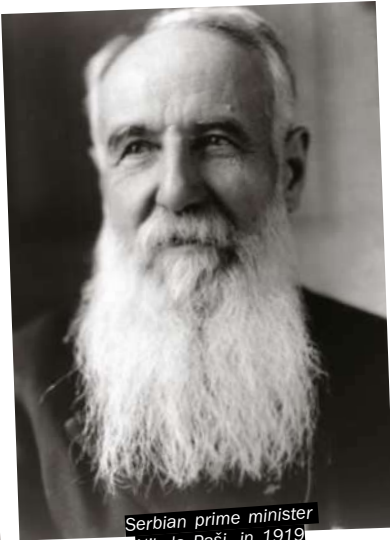


21 June 1914

## SERBIA ISSUES AN OPAQUE WARNING

Serbian prime minister fails to warn of plot against Franz Ferdinand

In June 1914, the Serbian prime minister, Nikola Paši, sent a telegram to the Serbian legation in Vienna warning of a plot against Franz Ferdinand. Belgrade's man in Vienna, Jovan Jovanovi, then met with the Austro-Hungarian finance minister on 21 June 1914 to warn in the vaguest terms that a visit by the Archduke could end in tragedy. That Paši didn't communicate the threat directly to the Austro-Hungarian foreign minister, instead choosing the ultra-nationalist Jovanovi – who is rumoured to have commanded guerrilla bands in Bosnia after annexation – who could be relied upon to tell someone further from decision making and probably tell them as unconvincingly as possible, suggests that this might have been a warning Paši felt he needed to be seen to issue, but didn't necessarily want to be heard.



Serbian prime minister  
Nikola Paši in 1919

28 June 1914

## FERDINAND IS ASSASSINATED

On 28 June 1914 the Archduke Franz Ferdinand – nephew and heir to Emperor Franz Josef of Austria-Hungary – along with his wife – Duchess Sophie – were shot and killed while inspecting the troops in the Bosnian capital, Sarajevo. The man pulling the trigger was radicalised Bosnian-Serb student, Gavrilo Princip – an assassin from the secret military society, the Black Hand, which was equipped and supported by conspirators within the Serbian army.

Though unpopular, the Archduke's death provided all the pretext the Habsburg court needed to curtail the belligerent Serbia. Beyond the excuse it provided, Franz

Ferdinand was the leader of a think-tank within the Austro-Hungarian military that advocated reorganising the empire along federal lines.

A more representative Austria-Hungary could have silenced demands for independence from the Slavic communities in the empire – many of whom were still relatively loyal to Franz Josef himself, just critical of the state – loosening Serbia's influence in Croatia and Bosnia. It also would have undermined Russia's self-proclaimed mission to 'protect' the Slavic and Orthodox Christian people. But it was never to be.



Gavrilo Princip arrested by  
Austro-Hungarian police  
shortly after the shooting

23 July 1914

## AUSTRIA-HUNGARY DECLARES WAR!

Political alliances lead to domino-effect war

Concerned that public opinion would not back war, the Austro-Hungarian government – champing at the bit to knock the Balkan upstart down a peg or two since 1912 – prepared an ultimatum that would be near impossible for Serbia to accept. Wilhelm II in Berlin voiced his support for Austria-Hungary, advising the German ambassador to Vienna, "We must finish with the Serbs, quickly.

Now or never!" Indeed the conditions were too humiliating for Serbia to agree to and, on 28 July 1914, Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia.

Like a chain of dominos tumbling in succession Russia, Germany, France, Britain and all their overseas dominions were plunged into war. Italy, the Ottoman Empire, Japan and eventually the US would follow, as WWI progressed.



German trenches on the Aisne  
River during World War I



# 1914

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The Battle of the Frontiers established the direction of future combat on the Western Front during World War I

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The Germans inflicted a terrible defeat on the overconfident Russians in the opening days of the First World War

## 24 THE FIRST BATTLE OF THE MARNE

German and Allied armies battled in a titanic clash that saved France

## 28 RACE TO THE SEA

A series of attempts to outflank the enemy's forces, the race to the sea set the stage for years of trench warfare

## 32 THE FIRST BATTLE OF YPRES

Germany's hopes for a swift and total victory would flounder in the rubble of this ancient city







1914



*Belgian troops guide dog-drawn machine gun carts towards the frontline during the retreat from Antwerp*

# BATTLE OF THE FRONTIERS

7 AUGUST - 6 SEPTEMBER 1914

The Battle of the Frontiers established the direction of future combat on the Western Front during World War I

**A**ctually a series of engagements, the Battle of the Frontiers was fought in the summer of 1914. The great powers of Europe had developed plans for the opening phases of just such a major military confrontation. In Germany, Field Marshal Alfred von Schlieffen, chief of the Imperial General Staff, had developed a plan that bore his name.

Counting on the likelihood of a two-front war that would see Germany fighting France in the west and Russia in the east, Schlieffen envisioned a plan that would violate Belgian neutrality by using the country as a highway to attack France, which

was expected to thrust eastward into the disputed provinces of Alsace and Lorraine. In 1906, the new chief of staff, Field Marshal Helmuth von Moltke the Younger, modified the Schlieffen Plan, weakening the main thrust while bolstering forces to counterbalance the Russian threat. In France, Chief of Staff General Joseph Joffre organised Plan XVII, an advance into Alsace-Lorraine, just as the Germans expected.

When hostilities broke out, seven German armies executed the Schlieffen Plan, thrusting into Belgium on 3 August 1914 and subduing the country in a brutal occupation known as the 'Rape of Belgium'. Joffre initiated Plan XVII, discounting

reports that the Germans were moving through Belgium in strength. The French advanced but were counterattacked and retired in late August. French thrusts toward Belgium were decisively defeated, while the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) landed on the continent. Both were compelled to retreat during subsequent fighting.

The Allies began a protracted withdrawal toward Paris and fought delaying actions in early September. Their counterattack at the First Battle of the Marne forced the Germans back to the Aisne River, but repeated assaults failed to achieve further gains. Both sides began a race toward the sea in a bid to outflank each other.



# THE BATTLE OF MULHOUSE

7-10 AND 14-26 AUGUST 1914

The first French Army attack on Germany during World War I, the Battle of Mulhouse launched an invasion of Alsace

## 1. OPENING MOVES

General Louis Bonneau led the French VII Corps, including the 14th and 41st Divisions, from the town of Belfort northeast toward Colmar and Mulhouse in the province of Alsace, previously lost to Germany during the Franco-Prussian War. Despite logistical delays, the French reached the outskirts of Mulhouse on the first day.

## 2. TAKING THE TOWN

French troops marched into Mulhouse on 8 August 1914, after the German defenders had abandoned the town. German forces regrouped and launched probing attacks from their jump-off positions in the Hardt Forest the following morning and recaptured the town on 10 August as French command and control deteriorated. Bonneau withdrew toward Belfort.

## 3. A REJUVENATED THRUST

Field Marshal Joseph Joffre sacked Bonneau, and the new commander of the Army of Alsace, General Paul Pau, advanced a stronger force towards Mulhouse as part of a larger French offensive. Launched on 14 August, the new offensive passed through Dannemarie. By 16 August the French were once again poised to assault Mulhouse.

## 4. STREET FIGHTING

On both banks of the Doller River, the Germans gave ground. Combat raged in the streets of the Mulhouse suburb of Dornach. By 19 August the French had driven the Germans out of the town, forcing them to withdraw into the Hardt Forest and across the Rhine River in order to avoid being trapped.

## 5. A THREAT TO THE FLANK

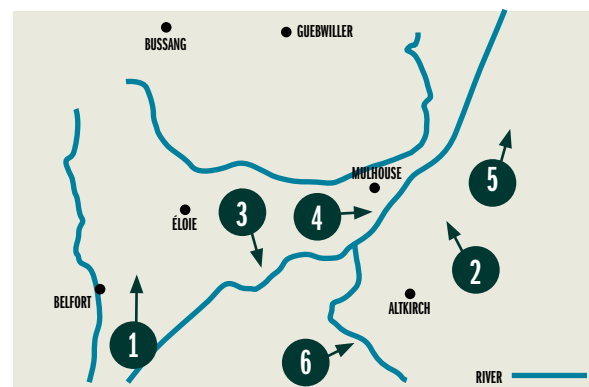
After capturing 3,000 German prisoners and taking bridges across the Rhine, the French controlled upper Alsace and prepared to continue their offensive, but the German 7th Army threatened the right flank of the French 1st Army, slowing deployments. Additionally, French defeats in Lorraine brought an end to further offensive operations in the area.

## 6. A DEFENSIVE WITHDRAWAL

Events elsewhere compelled the French to give up Mulhouse and execute a withdrawal to better defensive positions around the village of Altkirch, beginning 26 August. The movement also allowed the Army of Alsace, which was soon to be disbanded, to reinforce the French troops positioned to defend against a growing German threat to Paris.



**ABOVE** French troops surge forward during their attempt to capture the town of Mulhouse and retake the disputed province of Alsace



**ABOVE** German lancers take heavy casualties from Belgian fire during their attempt to advance beyond the village of Haelen

# THE BATTLE OF HAELEN

12 AUGUST 1914

A setback for the Germans during their invasion of Belgium, the Battle of Haelen briefly slowed their advance

## 1. CAVALRY ON THE MOVE

In early August 1914, the German II Cavalry Corps was ordered to make a reconnaissance toward the Belgian cities of Antwerp and Charleroi and the capital of Brussels. Noting few prepared defences or Allied forces in the area, the Germans advanced toward Diest, while the Belgians prepared to respond to the incursion.

## 2. HORSEMEN ON GUARD

The Belgian cavalry division under General Léon de Witte was charged with guarding the bridges over the Gete River at Haelen and other locations. To protect the Haelen crossing, de Witte deployed dismounted cavalry and a battalion of bicycle infantry between the towns of Zelck and Velpen to resist any German advance through Haelen.

## 3. THE GERMAN VANGUARD

Slowed down by the scorching summer heat and a serious shortage of feed for their horses, the German cavalry began its advance on 12 August through the towns of Alken and Stevoort. Meanwhile, the Belgian high command had learned of the German movement through radio intercepts and sent a brigade of infantry to reinforce General de Witte.

## 4. OPENING FIRE

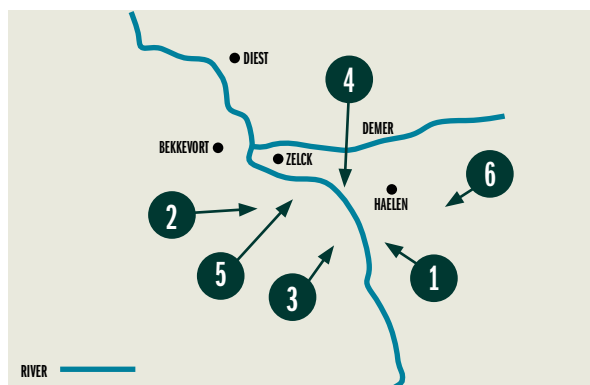
German scouts took fire from defending Belgian troops as they advanced from positions around Herk-de-Stad, and about 200 Belgian soldiers attempted to establish a defensive position in an old brewery in the town of Haelen. However, they were driven out when the Germans brought up artillery and began bombarding the area.

## 5. BLOW THE BRIDGE

Belgian engineers tried to blow up the bridge across the Gete River at Haelen, but the Germans put about 1,000 troops into the town. They hauled artillery to the edge of the Haelen, but attacks beyond were repulsed with heavy casualties as some cavalymen were hung up on wire entanglements and fences.

## 6. A TEMPORARY SETBACK

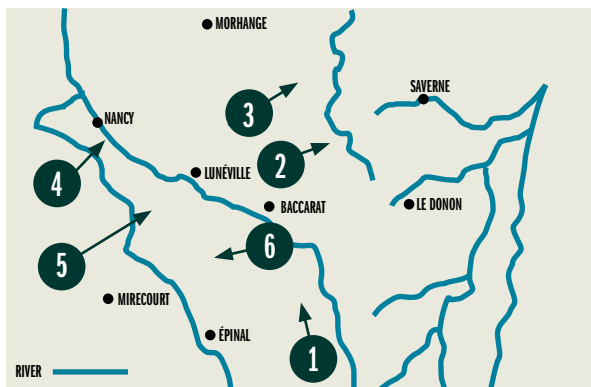
Late in the day, German General Georg von der Marwitz suspended the attacks and withdrew eastward towards Hasselt. Although the battle was a Belgian victory, the general German offensive through the country was only briefly slowed. The invaders captured fortified positions at Liege, Antwerp, and Namur, and their advance continued into October.







**ABOVE** French soldiers fire from a rooftop at distant German positions to gauge the enemy's strength during the Battle of Lorraine



# THE BATTLE OF LORRAINE

14-25 AUGUST 1914

France and Germany began the execution of their master plans for victory on the Western Front in World War I

## 1. FIRST FRENCH FORAY

After probing attacks on the night of 11 August, the French launched elements of their 1st and 2nd Armies into the Vosges Mountains, compelling German troops under Crown Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria to fall back. The advance was sluggish in some areas as dug-in German troops and artillery inflicted heavy casualties.

## 2. THE FRENCH CONNECTION

The French bolstered their advance against Sarrebourg and discovered that the Germans had withdrawn from the city. Field Marshal Joffre, overall French commander in the field, ordered the 2nd Army to reorient further to the north, extending an existing gap that had developed with the 1st Army to its right.

## 3. A GERMAN COUNTERSTROKE

The Germans unleashed a counterattack on 20 August, which subsequently required the French to fight separate defensive actions. The heaviest blows fell in the vicinity of the villages of Sarrebourg and Morhange. In a rapid reversal of the tactical situation, the French forces were swiftly defeated and began to pull back in the face of the German advance.

## 4. A SLOW PURSUIT

The German pursuit of the retreating French forces was lethargic, and General Édouard de Castelnau, commanding the French 2nd Army, had enough time to establish a defensive position near the city of Nancy. Taking advantage of the slow pace of the German pursuit, Castelnau extended his right wing southward and reestablished contact with the 1st Army.

## 5. THE GERMAN HAMMER

By 22 August, the Germans had arrived opposite the recently established French defensive line in sufficient strength to begin hammering the positions with artillery and infantry assaults. The German attacks succeeded in bending the French right flank back 25 kilometres (16 miles) beyond their original jump-off point eight days earlier.

## 6. ATTACK AND DEFEND

The French 1st Army was compelled to retire but maintained contact with 2nd Army as they reorganised and faced the continuing German onslaught. During three days of fighting from 24-26 August the French halted the German offensive around Trouée de Charmes. They regained their original line in September.

# THE BATTLE OF THE ARDENNES

21-23 AUGUST 1914

German armies won a victory along their frontier with Belgium and France and forced the French to retreat

## 1. SUPPORTING ATTACK

To support French attacks into the disputed province of Lorraine, French Marshal Joseph Joffre ordered a substantial thrust into the dense Ardennes Forest to begin on 21 August despite knowledge that the Germans had massed significant forces in the area. Expecting a German offensive, Joffre ordered bridges over the Semois River to be seized.

## 2. MUTUAL ASSAULTS

French attacks were timed to wait for the first German strike, as Joffre was wary of moving beyond the Semois should his forces become overextended prematurely. The battle opened on 20 August with German attacks against the French 1st and 2nd armies in the south. The French thrust followed within hours.

## 3. FRENCH FORCES FORWARD

General Fernand de Langle de Cary led the French 4th Army across the Semois towards Neufchâteau, while General Pierre Ruffey's 3rd Army advanced toward Arlon to counter possible German attacks from Metz. The French renamed part of 3rd Army as the Army of Lorraine, which guarded the flank during the thrust into Belgium.

## 4. GERMANS ON ALERT

A strong German contingent, including components of the 4th Army under Albrecht, Duke of Württemberg, and the 5th Army of Crown Prince Wilhelm, were positioned between Metz and the frontier of Luxembourg. On 2 August, the French attacked strong defensive positions at Longwy and were soundly defeated.

## 5. DEFENSIVE VICTORIES

Further north, German forces routed a French assault near Virton. Although the 4th Army was pressed, the French line held and contact between the two French armies was maintained. Joffre's attacks produced no positive results, and the Germans seized the initiative. At Rossignol, south of Neufchâteau, the French Colonial Corps were defeated.

## 6. FRENCH ADVANCE FAILED

Initial French advances in the north were reversed with heavy losses. One division abandoned its artillery in the retreat when the Germans outflanked the XVII Corps. The Germans pushed the French V Corps back in the centre, thwarting Joffre's efforts to renew attacks. Most of the French troops retired to their original positions.

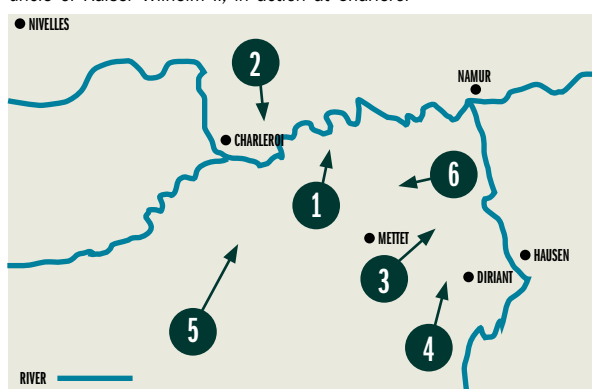


**ABOVE** French colonial troops relax after receiving medals for their heroism during the bloody Battle of the Frontiers, particularly those who fought in the Ardennes





ABOVE This colourful image depicts the death of Prince Adalbert, uncle of Kaiser Wilhelm II, in action at Charleroi



# THE BATTLE OF CHARLEROI

21-23 AUGUST 1914

French forces narrowly averted disaster as the Germans beat them to the punch, compelling them to withdraw

## 1. FRENCH BATTLE PLANS

French Marshal Joseph Joffre intended to launch an attack across the Sambre River with General Charles Lanzerac's 5th Army. However, strong German formations were detected already on the move to the west. Around 2pm Lanzerac became aware of skirmishes around Charleroi and Namur and received discretion to initiate the offensive.

## 2. FIGHT AND FALL BACK

In the west, the French were reinforced and initially stood their ground, but after nightfall on 21 August a tactical withdrawal was executed as German firepower in the area increased. The Germans crossed the Sambre. To the east, attacks on the French 3rd Corps made headway and bridges across the river were contested.

## 3. REQUEST FOR SUPPORT

Early on 22 August, Lanzerac reported on the furious German attacks around Namur and asked Joffre to commit the 4th Army to action. On the right flank, French 1st Corps attacks were repulsed by the XII Saxon Corps, already on the move against the bridges across the Meuse River at Dinant and elsewhere.

## 4. GERMANS ON THE MARCH

As German attacks continue all along the front on 22 August, the pressure on the right flank prevented the French from reinforcing positions elsewhere. With the French right flank now in peril, Lanzerac gave authorisation for engineers to blow up all bridges across the Meuse except at Dinant, Hastière and Givet.

## 5. THE FRENCH CENTRE WAVERS

On 23 August, the French centre at Charleroi began a gradual contraction, while the German 3rd Army under Colonel General Max von Hausen assaulted the French I Corps on the right flank and nearly cut off the retreat of Lanzerac's French 5th Army. A spirited counterattack slowed the Germans' progress.

## 6. RETREAT AND DEFEAT

As the last day of the battle wore on the situation began to deteriorate for the French. Lanzerac was aware of reversals in the Ardennes and abandoned the town of Namur after hearing the news. To avoid encirclement and becoming isolated from the rest of the French armies he ordered a general withdrawal.

# THE BATTLE OF MONS

23 AUGUST 1914

Although forced to retire, the British Expeditionary Force bought valuable time for Allied forces to regroup

## 1. THE BRITISH ARE COMING

Recently arrived on the European continent for the first time since the Battle of Waterloo a century earlier, British troops under the command of Field Marshal Sir John French were originally intended to support General Charles Lanzerac's French 5th Army offensive, which was thwarted by German attacks in the Ardennes.

## 2. SEPARATE BATTLES

Delays and friction between Field Marshal French and General Lanzerac resulted in the French 5th Army and the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) fighting separate engagements, therefore rendering them unable to provide mutual support. The German 1st Army, under General Alexander von Kluck, advanced toward the Mons Canal (a waterway 60 feet wide) in western Belgium.

## 3. THE BATTLE JOINED

The four divisions of the British Expeditionary Force defended the Mons Canal as German artillery opened fire at 9am on the morning of 23 August, their sights concentrated on a British salient near a loop in the canal. The Germans outnumbered the British about two to one but failed to press their initial advantage.

## 4. LEFT IN THE BREACH

On the afternoon of 23 August, General Lanzerac ordered the French 5th Army to withdraw from the Ardennes, uncovering the British flank and leaving nearly 35,000 British soldiers in danger of being encircled. British troops at the embattled salient defended their position for more than six hours as casualties mounted.

## 5. GERMAN CANAL CROSSING

As the day wore on, troops of the German IX Corps began crossing the Mons Canal east of the British salient under heavy fire. By 3pm elements of the British Expeditionary Force were compelled to begin an orderly withdrawal. They established a new defensive line to the south.

## 6. A FIGHTING RETREAT

Although they were battered and badly fatigued by the ferocity of the fighting, most of the British soldiers were very surprised by the order to withdraw. A number of severe clashes occurred between the advancing German troops and the British rear guard as it pulled back. The two-week retreat ended with the British on the outskirts of Paris preparing for a counterattack along the Marne River.



ABOVE British soldiers of the 4th Battalion, Royal Fusiliers rest in the town of Mons before going into the defensive line







*Russian prisoners of war after the Battle of Tannenberg*

# THE BATTLE OF TANNENBERG

25-30 AUGUST 1914

The Germans inflicted a terrible defeat on the overconfident Russians in the bloody opening days of the First World War

**T**he Germans knew that it would take time for the Russians to mobilise their soldiers. The basic strategy, as put forth by General Alfred Graf von Schlieffen, in what became known as the Schlieffen Plan, was to hold in the east against the Russians while the massive German armies in the west defeated France. A mighty German pincer would plow through northern France and swing south, enveloping Paris. Once France had been crushed, Germany would turn to face Russia.

In accordance with Schlieffen's strategy, German Chief of Staff General Helmuth von Moltke had stationed only a relatively small number of troops in East Prussia, just 11 infantry divisions and one cavalry, or around 15 per cent of Germany's total military strength.

The Russians had to make choices too. They faced a two-pronged threat from the Germans in

the northwest and the Austro-Hungarians to the south in Poland. The Russians decided to split their troops and sent a large number against the Austro-Hungarians. The remaining portion was sent across the East Prussian frontier.

The Russian First Army, commanded by General Pavel Rennenkampf, crossed into East Prussia on 17 August. The Russian Second Army, led by General Alexander Samsonov, followed a few days later. Things initially went well for the Russians, who achieved a tactical victory at the Battle of Gumbinnen on 20 August. This caused Moltke to send two men to take control of the deteriorating situation, which teetered on the brink of disaster. These were the elderly General Paul von Hindenburg, who would take command of the reeling German Eighth Army, and his chief of staff, the brilliant General Erich Ludendorff, who had captured the Belgian city of Liège just a week

before. Both men reached the front on 23 August. They had not a moment to lose.

The Russians had by now made gains, but supply problems surfaced once they crossed the German border. Russian trains could not use the narrower German tracks, so provisions had to be transported to the front by other means. The exhausted Russian troops soon became hungry. Even so, they still posed a formidable threat.

Then came a stroke of amazing good fortune for the Germans. Two uncoded Russian radio messages were intercepted that revealed that the First and Second armies had become separated from one another. This presented Hindenburg and Ludendorff with a golden opportunity to concentrate their meagre forces against one Russian army before the other could react. The blow would fall on Samsonov's Second Army of over 250,000 men to the south.

On Tuesday 25 August, the 150,000 men of the Eighth Army began pummeling Samsonov's advancing columns. The Russians had thought the Germans were in retreat, but they now found themselves subject to a ferocious German artillery bombardment. Bullets scythed through the Russian infantry of Samsonov's right wing while Rennenkampf's First Army remained too far away to help – even if it had been closer, neither general wished to aid the other. Their fatal separation was punished on 27 August when the German hammer fell on the Second Army's left wing.

The killing blow came on the same day as the German army under General Hermann von

François, which had been late in getting started, found itself ideally poised to hit the Second Army in the rear. The Russians were surrounded, and machine guns mowed them down without mercy. Shrapnel shredded infantrymen caught out of cover. By 28 August, the disaster was complete, with just a few remnants left to mop up.

Over 50,000 Russians were either killed or wounded in the battle. Some 92,000 were made prisoner and 350 artillery pieces were captured. The Russian Second Army had ceased to exist, with its pitiful survivors wandering through the forest in a state of shock at their sudden and severe mauling. A dejected Samsonov found a quiet spot

and shot himself. German losses amounted to a mere 12,000 casualties.

Ludendorff named the stunning victory 'Tannenberg' after a village that lay a good distance away from the actual fighting. In 1410, a proud host of German Teutonic Knights had been crushed by Lithuanians and Poles. With this new triumph, Germany's medieval defeat had been avenged.

With the Second Army out of the way, the Germans next turned against the isolated First Army under Rennenkampf, utterly destroying it in the First Battle of the Masurian Lakes in early September. The Russian invasion of East Prussia had been repelled in the most stunning fashion.

# BATTLE OF TANNENBERG

The rout that almost destroyed the entire Russian Second Army in a day

## 1. INTO EAST PRUSSIA

The 200,000-strong Russian First Army under General P K Rennenkampf, entered the north of East Prussia on 17 August. Three days later it was met by a section of the 150,000-strong German Eighth Army, headed by General Maximilian von Prittwitz, at Gumbinnen. Russian artillery fire ensured the ensuing battle went against the Germans, who retreated.

## 2. SOUTHERN ADVANCE

Tsar Nicholas II wanted two Russian armies in East Prussia, so the Second Army was mobilised near Tannenberg in the southwest. Here, only three divisions of the German Eighth Army were in position. General Prittwitz had by now been replaced by Paul von Hindenburg.

## 3. GERMAN RETREAT

The First Army advanced towards Königsberg, the largest easternmost German city, but stopped a few miles short. By this point thousands of German troops had started to head south to head off the threat of the Russian Second Army.

## 4. NO HELP

The Second Army, led by General Alexander Samsonov, had hoped the First Army would send troops to support their advance north. The Germans intercepted a message that indicated this wouldn't happen, enabling them to defend Tannenberg.

## 5. THE RAILWAYS

A corp of the German Eighth Army was sent towards Tannenberg on the Russians' left flank. The Second Army had no idea this was happening. When Samsonov realised the Germans were heading his way, he sent a note detailing how he would deal with them. This was also intercepted.

## 6. REINFORCEMENTS

More divisions of the First Army marched south and took up positions to the right of the Second Army. The remaining cavalry in the north of East Prussia spread out so that it could better deal with General Rennenkampf's army should it move forward.

## 7. TAKING POSITIONS

German General Erich Ludendorff used the intercepted messages to work out the best positions to take in the south. The Russians found it difficult to get their bearings amid the wooded surroundings but they moved forward. The Germans quickly advanced too.

## 8. ENCIRCLED RUSSIANS

The left flank of German troops isolated the Russians, who were encircled in a forest. Some fled, but 92,000 were taken prisoner and the rest killed. Despairing, General Samsonov shot himself. The Russians in the north barely moved, and with victory in the south, the Germans mobilised to meet them, eventually driving them out of East Prussia.

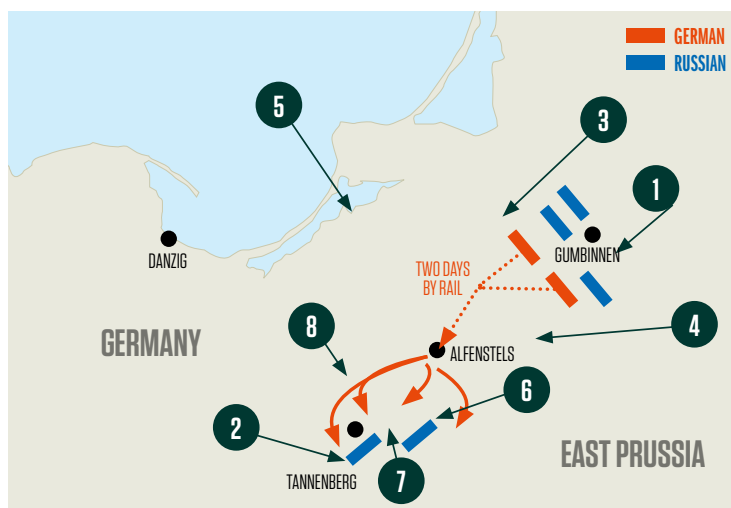
### DEATH IN THE FOREST

**Main weapon used:**  
Artillery and intelligence  
**German casualties:** 12,000  
**Russian casualties:** 172,000  
**Did you know?** Russian Generals P K Rennenkampf and Alexander Samsonov disliked one another intensely.

**"OVER 50,000 RUSSIANS WERE EITHER KILLED OR WOUNDED IN THE BATTLE. SOME 92,000 WERE MADE PRISONER. A DEJECTED SAMSONOV SHOT HIMSELF"**



ABOVE Captured Russian soldiers at the train station in an East Prussian city





# THE FIRST BATTLE OF THE MARNE

5-10 SEPTEMBER 1914

German and Allied armies battled in a titanic clash that saved France

**T**he German General Staff, which prepared Imperial Germany's war plans, foresaw that a two-front war would be devastating to Germany. Any chance for victory would decline as the weight of numbers of its enemies increased, and it was forced to divide its forces between east and west.

Field Marshal Alfred Graf von Schlieffen had taken up this problem as Chief of the General Staff from 1891-1906. Schlieffen's idea, which would become known to history as the 'Schlieffen Plan', was to concentrate an extremely powerful force in northern Germany, on the Belgian border, to deliver a massive punch against the French. To the south, Germany would mount only a limited holding operation. The northern pincer would advance rapidly west, past Paris, and then swing south to bag the capital and the French armies still fighting

to the east in one giant envelopment. France would be knocked out in four to eight weeks of furious fighting. Once this had been accomplished, Germany could send its freed-up armies to the east to fight the Russians.

For the Schlieffen Plan to have any chance of success, the general presiding over Germany's war had to have nerves of steel. Unfortunately, the military man on whose shoulders this incomparable burden fell, Helmuth von Moltke the Younger, was constitutionally unsuited for the task. Moltke, however, was assailed by doubts even before the war began. He withdrew powerful units from the right wing and transferred them to the southern flank to better protect Germany there.

On 4 August huge German armies stomped through neutral Belgium, the best avenue into northern France, thereby bringing Britain into the war on the side of France and Russia. To

support the French, Britain dispatched the British Expeditionary Force, or BEF, to the continent.

The Belgian fortress-city of Liège, thought impregnable, was pulverised by gigantic Krupp siege howitzers over four days, with the last forts capitulating on 16 August.

The initial battles on the frontiers went poorly for the Allies. The French unwittingly helped the Germans by launching major attacks into German-held Alsace-Lorraine on 14 August. This sent much of France's strength away from Paris, which was the main target of the German assault according to the Schlieffen Plan. Defending were the German 6th and 7th Armies. The French offensive spirit was admirable, but they paid dearly for it, being cut down by German bullets and artillery fire. On 20 August, the Germans launched their own counterattack, and forced them back. Moltke would send troops to reinforce the armies in Lorraine,



*Soldiers charge during the First Battle of the Marne*



weakening the right wing that had to be kept strong in order for the Schlieffen Plan to succeed.

In the centre of the front, the French Third and Fourth Armies battled the Germans in the Ardennes. The French were subjected to a blistering fire and hurled back.

To the north, opposite the powerful German right wing, the French Fifth Army engaged the German 2nd Army under General Karl von Bülow on the Sambre River on 21 August. The Germans rushed forward, hammering the French and seizing the bridgeheads. By the next night, the French Fifth Army was in retreat.

The British Expeditionary Force, under its commander in chief, General Sir John French, entered the fray and met the German 1st Army under General Alexander von Kluck at Mons, Belgium, on 23 August. This happened to be the first time British soldiers fought in Europe since Waterloo in 1815. The Germans outnumbered them, and they too were forced to retreat from Mons by the 24 August.

That same day, General Joseph Joffre, the French Army's commander-in-chief, realised France had to switch entirely to the defensive. Its offensive strategy of attacking in Alsace-Lorraine had brought only defeat and had actually played into enemy hands by drawing forces away from Belgium, where the main German thrust was coming from.

Joffre placed Paris under a military governor, General Joseph Gallieni. This helped restore a measure of confidence, which was fragile, as the French government was itself evacuating the capital, along with its 1 million residents. Slowly but surely, Joffre reasserted control over the reeling Allied armies and prepared a stout defence.

Moltke, on the other hand, was beginning to break down under the strain of guiding the German Army through this all-important battle. He was still in Germany, over 160 kilometres (100 miles) from the front, and was out of touch with his forces in the field. His appetite disappeared, as did any capacity to sleep.

Meanwhile, Joffre's build-up of forces outside Paris continued. Once he had decided to go over to the defensive, he activated a brand-new formation, the French Sixth Army, under General Joseph Manoury, to collect the reinforcements that were pouring in from all over France. Even though the French had been worsted in the battles on the frontiers, they had not been broken, and there was still a coherent front line, however tenuous, between Paris and the Germans. While the Germans marched on, believing the war to be all but won, thousands of French soldiers readied themselves for Joffre's coming counterattack on the Marne River.

This was all happening outside the knowledge of the Germans, who kept up their advance. The Germans again hammered the British at Le Cateau on 26 August, and then the French at Guise on 29 August. With victory seemingly at hand, on 31 August, Moltke ordered Kluck to change direction and turn south and southeast, which would bring



*A dead German soldier from the First Battle of the Marne*

## **“THE FRENCH GOVERNMENT WAS ITSELF EVACUATING THE CAPITAL, ALONG WITH ITS 1 MILLION RESIDENTS”**

the German 1st Army to the east of Paris, not the west, as originally intended by the Schlieffen Plan. Kluck would in fact now be marching blithely right before Manaury's coalescing Sixth Army, which in time would number some 150,000 men.

A week later, on 5 September, Moltke, learning of the French soldiers massing around Paris – these were none other than Manaury's Sixth Army – ordered Kluck's 1st Army to execute a turn to the west to guard against it, bringing its southward movement to a halt. This was a startling deviation from the Schlieffen Plan.

At this point, Moltke was largely out of contact with his leading armies. It was next to impossible for Moltke, or indeed any supreme commander, to stay in touch with his forces in a timely and regular manner given the technological limitations of the day. Much of what he received back at his headquarters in Germany, which he had moved to Luxembourg, was either out-of-date when he received it or altogether wrong. Sometimes he received no replies at all to his inquiries.

German supplies were also troubled. Once the German forces had marched away from their railheads and crossed the frontier, everything had to be hauled forward by horse, and to a lesser extent by motor vehicles. Simply moving proved difficult. Almost all soldiers were infantry, and they could march, at best, about 32 kilometres (20 miles) a day. They became exhausted and so too did their horses, which died in droves of exhaustion and overuse.

One of the greatest liabilities for the Germans at this time had nothing to do with communications, supply, or even enemy action. It was Moltke himself. He was temperamentally ill-wrought for the stressful position he held and found it difficult to stick to a decision once he had made it. Joffre,

on the other hand, was showing an admirable coolheadedness under pressure.

The stage was set for the climactic showdown that would decide the fate of Europe; the German armies, hitherto unbeaten in the field, against the down – but not out – French Army and the BEF. Joffre went to visit General French of the BEF. He explained his plan for the upcoming battle on the Marne in which he would crush the Germans. He made a heartfelt plea for British participation. “The honour of England is at stake,” Joffre told him. French promised his full support. Joffre then set his rebuilt armies in motion.

On 5 September, the vanguard of Manaury's Sixth Army, moving up for the main attack, set to begin the next day, ran into elements of Kluck's 1st Army under General Hans von Gronau at the Ourcq, a tributary of the Marne River. Manaury's thrust was perfectly placed to hit the 1st Army in the flank and rear. Kluck had been busy guiding his soldiers in crossing the Petit Morin and the Grand Morin, both tributaries of the Marne. Learning that Gronau was in contact with the enemy, he sent a corps back the way he had come in support.

The French had lost the element of surprise in blundering into Gronau. They hit him again the next day, 6 September, with artillery hammering the Germans and rifle fire shredding them, and managed to push him back, but not by much. However, the fighting on the Ourcq had the benefit, where the French were concerned, of drawing the rest of German 1st Army back north to contend with French Sixth Army. 1st Army was no longer moving south at all, as the Schlieffen Plan necessitated. It also lost contact completely with Bülow's 2nd Army, with a chasm stretching to some 48 kilometres (30 miles) between the two embattled German armies.





*The first captured  
Belgian soldiers at the  
beginning of August*

On 7 September, French Fifth Army, under General Louis Franchet d'Espèrey, and the BEF moved up. Fifth Army took on two corps from Kluck's 1st Army, holding them at the Grand Morin. Fifth Army then headed north and attacked Bulow's 2nd Army on the Petit Morin. German 2nd Army was also hit by General Ferdinand Foch's newly organised French Ninth Army further west. The BEF, in the meantime, had started out a good distance from the front and marched during the day without making contact with the Germans.

Also on the 7th, the BEF was still marching north and had not found its way into combat, but the Germans had been brought to a halt all along the 320-kilometre (200-mile) battlefront. The whole of the German 1st Army was concentrated against the French Sixth Army on the Ourcq. Further east, the German 2nd Army's unsupported right wing was being drawn back by Bülow. Its left wing was mauling the French Ninth Army, while the German 3rd Army, under General Max von Hausen, pummelled Foch's exhausted men too.

The need for reinforcements for the French Sixth Army, in the midst of its all-out battle with the Germans, was so dire that a fleet of 400 taxi-cabs was organised by Gallieni. On 7 September they picked up the men of the 104th Infantry Brigade at a village named La Barrière. The astonished men piled in and were driven 50 kilometres (31 miles) to the front. Though only some 4,000 men were transported this way, in a battle involving

hundreds of thousands, the pluck of the drivers fired everyone's imagination and it became one of the enduring legends of the First World War. The drivers were paid handsomely too – they had left their meters running and received about two weeks' worth of fares for their drive to the front.

On the next day, 8 September, the ferocious bloodletting continued, with Foch's Ninth Army being shoved rearward five kilometres (three miles). That night, the French Fifth Army conducted a night attack that pried German 2nd Army's right wing from the Petit Morin. Bülow, its commander, drew this wing back even further, and the opening between Kluck's 1st Army gaped wider. The armies had battled furiously for days. The French had scarcely given ground, but the Germans had not been driven off either. Who would break first?

Into this maelstrom of blood, fire and steel now strode Lt Colonel Richard Hentsch, a liaison officer from Moltke's supreme headquarters. It is not clear what the precise remit was that Moltke had given to Hentsch to act in his name, but it seems to have been very broad. Hentsch visited the headquarters of the battling German armies one by one. After checking on the 3rd, 4th, and 5th Armies, which he judged to be doing well, he drove to Bülow's 2nd Army headquarters. Bülow, like Moltke, was cracking under the stress of battle. What Hentsch heard from Bülow was bad. The German 2nd Army had taken a beating in combat with the French and Kluck's 1st Army was out of

contact. Additionally, the BEF, which had not yet been committed to battle, was heading straight for the gap between the armies.

Hentsch stayed the night of 8-9 September at 2nd Army. Bülow's emotional collapse continued, with the fatigued general weeping constantly during the dark hours. On the morning of 9 September, on account of the damage it had suffered in combat and the looming threat of the BEF, Hentsch approved the 2nd Army's withdrawal from battle. This was a mind-bogglingly important decision to be left to such a low-ranked officer, but he carried the authority of Moltke with him.

Hentsch next drove over roads clogged with wounded soldiers and frightened civilian refugees to visit the 1st Army's headquarters. He found the 1st Army's staff officers optimistic about their fight. Oddly, he never met personally with Kluck, for reasons unknown, but nonetheless Hentsch told them they had to withdraw, as the 2nd Army was also doing so. Moreover, the BEF had at last crossed the Marne and had turned the 1st Army's open flank between it and the German 2nd Army. The 1st Army had no choice but to comply.

Having delegated enormous authority to Hentsch, Moltke had been reduced to being a mere spectator in one of the most important battles in Germany's history. He would receive reports from his emissary but was not on the scene to see for himself how the battle was developing. On 10 September, he put out his own order for a





retreat of German forces from the Marne, but this only confirmed what Hentsch had already ordered Germany's armies to do. Moltke's performance had been awful, and with his nerves destroyed, he would be relieved of command on 14 September.

The German retreat from the Marne took place overnight on 9-10 September. The next morning, the puzzled French discovered the Germans had slipped away. They had won, and the French soon dubbed the victory the 'Miracle of the Marne.'

The Germans withdrew to the Aisne River in good order. This was not a rout. The French and British who pursued them found the Germans sitting in strong defensive positions on the heights above the Aisne and could make no headway against them. Each side tried to outflank the other by moving north toward the English Channel. This race to the sea ended with neither side obtaining the advantage. What developed afterward was the bitter trench warfare which would characterise the bloody, muddy battlefields of the Western Front for the rest of the war.

## FIRST BATTLE OF THE AISNE

The battle that sowed the seeds for the long slog of trench warfare from 13-28 September

### 1. POST-MARNE

The Allies had pushed back the Germans in the First Battle of the Marne between 6 and 12 September 1914. But on 13 September, the German 1st and 2nd Armies stopped and took up positions on high ground at the River Aisne along its northern bank.

### 2. THICKET FENCE

With the ground rising to some 91-121m (300-400ft), the Germans had the advantage of being able to clearly see the Allies on lower ground. They could also hide behind dense thicket, which covered the steep cliff.

#### GERMAN 80% ALLIES

**Main weapon used:** Machine guns and trenches  
**German casualties:** Unknown  
**Allied casualties:** 14,000  
**Did you know?** The First Battle of Aisne caused the entrenchment of the Western Front, which was 764km (475mi) long

### 3. AN ASSAULT

The British Expeditionary Force crossed the Aisne on 13 September and ended up in two locations: Bour-et-Comin and Venizel. The French Fifth and Sixth Armies joined the offensive.

### 4. CHEMIN DES DAMES

The Fifth Army was successful in capturing the eastern section of Chemin des Dames but it was the only real breakthrough that occurred. By this time, the newly formed German 7th Army was making its way to the north bank to aid with its defence.

### 5. DISASTER STRIKES

The Germans had taken up a strong position at Chivres and from there they could see any advancements made by the British Expeditionary Force. From their high position on steep slopes, the Germans could simply fire at will at their approaching enemies.

### 6. DIGGING IN

On 14 September, it was clear the Germans were not about to budge, so Sir John French ordered the BEF to start digging trenches into the French soil using tools gained from farms and villages to provide greater cover for front-line troops.

### 7. RESPONSE

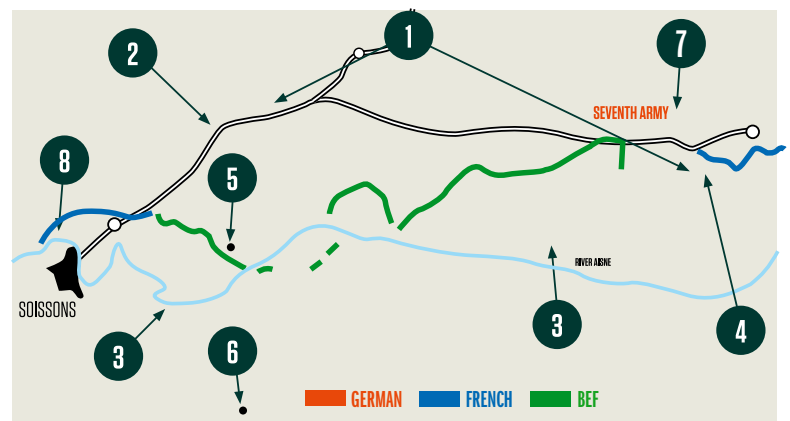
The Germans also dug trenches – this marked the start of the infamous trench warfare that would last for the war in many parts of the Western Front. The Germans adapted their equipment well, though, firing at the Allies with machine guns.

### 8. MANY CASUALTIES

As the days went by, the Allies' willingness to fight wore thin and the battle ended on 28 September. It prompted further trenches on both sides to be dug up along the river.



ABOVE In the British trenches near the Aisne in 1914







*The race to the sea involved unparalleled troop movements and immense loss of life*

# RACE TO THE SEA

**17 SEPTEMBER - 30 NOVEMBER 1914**

A series of attempts to outflank the enemy's forces, the race to the sea set the stage for years of trench warfare

**T**he term 'race to the sea' during the opening months of World War I is something of a misnomer. Rather than a race, the series of movements by the opposing German and Allied armies involved attempts by each side to turn the northern flank of its enemy. Following the opening Battle of the Frontiers in August and September 1914, the German offensive into France was stopped during desperate fighting at the First Battle of the Marne from 5-12 September and during the British-French counteroffensive that resulted in the Battle of the Aisne through the end of the month.

Four weeks of northward manoeuvres continued, leading to a series of encounter battles that ended in late-October with the two sides still opposing one another, although their disputed northern flanks were anchored on the coast of the North Sea. After the German defeat at the Marne, General Erich von Falkenhayn ordered much of his command to dig in along the Aisne to protect his right flank, while additional troops were moved west in preparation for a renewed offensive to turn the French left. This plan was discarded in favour of a general offensive with three armies attacking to the south, while a fourth executed a westward march to hit the enemy flank.

French attacks beginning on 18 September disrupted the German offensive, and Field Marshal Joseph Joffre altered his initial plan for a counteroffensive when the Germans were discovered defending the line along the Aisne. Joffre stepped up the transfer of troops from east to west, while German attacks in the area made some headway and created the long-standing St Mihiel Salient in the French line around Verdun. Both sides planned attacks that were either turned back or thwarted by enemy movements. Emphasis on moving to the west and north intensified, resulting in the "race" and the development of trench warfare the following winter.



# THE BATTLE OF PICARDY

22-26 SEPTEMBER 1914

The inconclusive Battle of Picardy was fought in the context of the larger Battle of the Aisne amid reciprocal flanking manoeuvres

## 1. FRENCH MARCH HALTED

French Marshal Joseph Joffre orders the 6th Army to advance along the Oise River but news that two German corps have marched south from the Belgian port city of Antwerp halts the march and requires the French to dig in around the villages of Roye and Nampcel. French reinforcements pour into the area.

## 2. THE GERMAN RESPONSE

By 22 August, the German II Corps transfers from the Aisne front as garrison troops are sufficient to hold that line. These troops support the IX Reserve Corps along with further reinforcements. The French encounter the enemy line during a thrust from Lassigny to Chaulnes and Roye, forcing a German retirement.

## 3. POSSIBLE COMMUNICATIONS DISRUPTION

Initial French successes threaten German lines of communication through the villages of St Quentin and Ham. In anticipation of this growing concern, the German XVIII Corps has been on the march from Reims toward Ham, a distance of 80km (50mi), since 21 September, arriving on the night of the 23rd.

## 4. FRESH CORPS ATTACK

The German XVIII Corps attacks the advancing French, pressing the enemy IV Corps back toward Roye along its right flank. North of the engagement, elements of the French 2nd Army cross the Somme River and establish a lodgment on the east bank; however, the effort exhausts the army's offensive capacity.

## 5. GERMAN COUNTERSTROKE

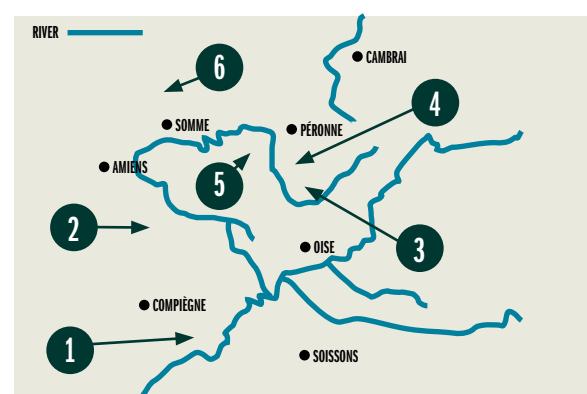
The German XIV Corps reaches Bapaume to the north, while the XXI and I Bavarian Corps recapture the town of Péronne and force the French to retreat west of the Somme, where they dig in along good defensive terrain. Further German attacks around Noyon push the 2nd Army back further.

## 6. LOOK TO THE NORTH

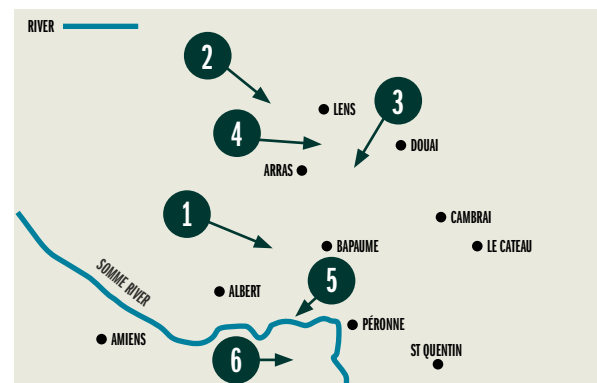
French counterattacks lead to a larger action along the expanse of the Western Front from 25-27 September and produce limited results as the 2nd Army moves further north toward Arras during a week of manoeuvres. General Erich von Falkenhayn orders German forces to concentrate further north in the direction of Amiens.



ABOVE General Erich von Falkenhayn led the German armies during the Battle of Picardy in 1914



ABOVE General Noël de Castelnau commanded the French 2nd Army during the race to the sea in 1914



# THE BATTLE OF ALBERT

25-29 SEPTEMBER 1914

Simultaneous movements to outflank the enemy led to a clash between French and German forces

## 1. FRENCH RENEWAL

Reinforced after its fight to the south, the French 2nd Army under General Noël de Castelnau advances eastward on 25 September toward the German northern flank, which is expected to be vulnerable. Instead, they run into the German 6th Army, which General Erich von Falkenhayn has already ordered forward in a similar movement.

## 2. FALKENHAYN'S MOVE FORWARD

By 26 September, the Germans have advanced to Bapaume, and the following day they reach Thiepval. Their cavalry moves north the next day as the II Bavarian Corps takes ground north of the Somme River. The II Cavalry Corps forces two French divisions, the 61st and 62nd Reserve, to give ground.

## 3. THE TABLES TURNED

While the Germans prepare for an attack on Albert to the southwest, French General Louis de Maud'huy gathers his forces of the Subdivision d'Armée at Arras, but discovers that the German offensive has imperiled his own dispositions. The Germans have pushed back a French division at Bapaume and started moving toward Bray-sur-Somme and Albert.

## 4. TOWARD THE SEA

As the Germans drive down the valley of the Somme River toward the sea, four French territorial divisions and four cavalry divisions defend the approaches toward Albert, stopping the Germans along a line from Thiepval to Maricourt, while the vanguard of the German II Cavalry Corps moves north close to Arras before French cavalry intervene.

## 5. FRICOURT AND FRENCH RESISTANCE

On 29 September, the German 28th Reserve Division captures Fricourt, but French artillery and machine-gun fire from beyond the village limit further advances there, as well as on the road north along the 26th Reserve Division line of advance. French counterattacks shut down the German initiative but fail to retake Fricourt.

## 6. ATTACK AND DEFEND

Fighting peters out overnight but resumes with sunrise, and the Germans are stopped at Maricourt just south of Fricourt as their counterattack thwarts an enemy attempt to capture high ground at Bazentin Ridge. The French, in turn, are halted as German troops arrive from Bapaume. They reinforce and plan another flanking movement.





**ABOVE** German soldiers guard a portion of a trenchline near Arras after hard fighting during the autumn of 1914

# THE BATTLE OF ARRAS

1-4 OCTOBER 1914

The French attempt another flanking movement but German advances place them squarely on the defensive around the town

## 1. JOFFRE DEFENDS TEMPORARILY

After beating back a German attack on the Cojeul River and high ground around Monchy-le-Preux, French forces around Arras are reinforced, and the 2nd Army is placed in a defensive posture. The detached Subdivision d'Armée attacks southeast of Arras but runs into three German corps planning to attack. The ensuing German envelopment stalls.

## 2. JOFFRE'S PLAN FORESTALLED

German attacks resume on 2 October, and French divisions transferred from the Vosges front are hastily deployed to meet the threat. The opposing forces move south and westward, and fighting rages around the village of Izel, which falls along with other towns in the area by dawn the following morning.

## 3. CONTINUING GERMAN ASSAULTS

From a line extending from Drocourt to Bois-Bernard and Fresnoy the Germans attack toward Neuville, but French artillery fire and infantry support from Acheville stops the drive. Three German divisions move up the valley of the Scarpe River to attack the outskirts of Arras at St Laurent. Mericourt and Acheville are occupied.

## 4. FRENCH DEFENSIVE FORTITUDE

The French stand fast outside Arras, forcing the Germans back and to the north. Further German attacks in the vicinity fail to gain headway. Difficult terrain and French counterattacks create some disorder among the Germans, but the French recover little territory as elements of their command lose contact with each other.

## 5. STAND AND FIGHT

Joffre rejects Castelnau's request for a withdrawal, counting on reinforcements to the north to divert German attention. Meanwhile, German attacks west of Avion are stymied by artillery fire from Lens and Givenchy but high ground near Souchez is captured. The Germans enter Lens and Souchez while capturing a portion of Vimy Ridge.

## 6. STABILISING THE LINE

Utilising rail transportation to efficiently respond to the aggressive German offensive moves, the French seek to minimise their own casualties and buy time to retake the initiative. German attempts to encircle Arras with repeated assaults from the north ultimately prove unsuccessful, and the fighting again moves northward toward the coast of the North Sea.

# THE BATTLE OF LA BASSÉE

10 OCTOBER - 2 NOVEMBER 1914

Swift German movement seizes Lille, but the British recover quickly and minimise further gains during three weeks of fighting

## 1. CAPTURE OF LILLE

In early-October the Germans occupy the city of Lille just ahead of the British and turn to attack the exposed British flank near the town of Ypres. The British II Corps reaches Abbeville by rail on 9 October and advances toward Bethune and occupies a line stretching both left and right of the village.

## 2. ACROSS THE CANAL

On 12 October, the British attack north of La Bassée Canal, advancing to Givenchy and Pont du Hem despite the best efforts of the German I and II Cavalry Corps and attacking infantry to slow them down. Preparations are quickly made for a resumption of the advance within a couple of days.

## 3. EASTWARD ALONG THE WATERWAY

After repulsing a German counterattack at Givenchy, the British II Corps turns eastward. While following the course of La Bassée Canal, the British take heavy casualties, losing nearly 1,000 men. In exchange, they make little headway along the flanks. French cavalry support is ineffective in establishing the advance's forward momentum.

## 4. EXECUTING THE PIVOT

The British II Corps pivots on its axis near La Bassée Canal, engaging its left in an advance to Aubers. Stubborn German resistance contests the line of march. However, the British establish a lodgment on Aubers Ridge while French cavalry ride into Fromelles. On 18 October, German reinforcements arrive and manage to halt the British advance.

## 5. ALLIED PROBES REBUFFED

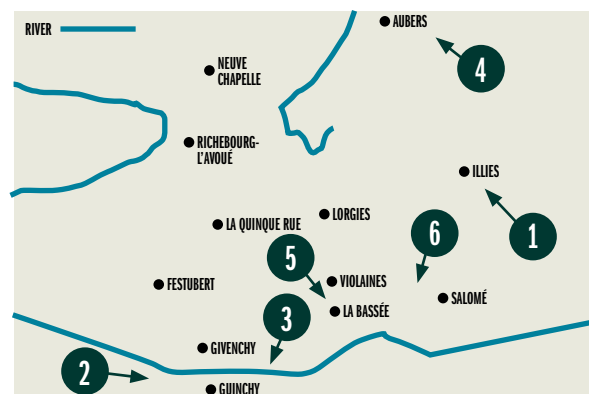
On 21 October, British and French troops enter the village of Le Pilly, but are soon ejected as German reinforcements arrive. Within two days, the British are ordered to dig in and hold the ground around Givenchy, Illies, Herlies, and Riez to the south, while operations continue in the north toward Aubers.

## 6. HOLDING THEIR GAINS

The entrenched British II Corps is reinforced by the Lahore Division of the Indian Corps and fends off repeated German counterattacks, holding onto its hard won territorial gains until early November. At that time both sides begin to refocus their resources toward a major battle looming around the city of Ypres.



**ABOVE** General Sir James Willcocks led the Indian Corps into battle in support of the British II Corps at La Bassée







**ABOVE** Soldiers of the 129th Baluchis, troops of the British Indian Army, march toward the front during the Battle of Messines in 1914

# THE BATTLE OF MESSINES

12 OCTOBER - 2 NOVEMBER 1914

The British III Corps joined the race to the sea and advanced between the Douves River and the Comines-Ypres Canal

## 1. ARRIVE OF III CORPS

As the British III Corps comes together at St. Omer and Hazebrouck on 10-12 October, its cavalry probes eastward toward the German-occupied city of Lille and extends northward toward Ypres. German forces are dug in on Mont des Cats, and the British 3rd Cavalry Brigade attacks these positions while occupying Mount Noir north of the town of Bailleul.

## 2. RESUMPTION OF THE RIDE

The British cavalry takes up the advance again on 14 October, riding north-eastward to capture the villages of Dranoutre and Kemmel against only token resistance from the Germans. The 3rd Cavalry Brigade links up with the 3rd Cavalry Division of IV Corps near Wytschaete.

## 3. FRENCH CAVALRY FORWARD

French horsemen take the town of Estaires on 15 October, but immediately run into stiff German resistance preventing an advance eastward to Comines. However, Allied forces enter Warneton, consequently driving the Germans to the far side of the Comines-Ypres Canal, gaining the upper hand. The following day, the Allied hold on the upper Lys River is solidified.

## 4. BEF ADVANCE

On October 16, the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) is ordered forward along a wide front. Taking advantage of the ongoing German retreat, the cavalry are ordered across the Lys River as the III Corps pushes north to make contact with the 7th Division in the vicinity of Ypres. The Allied positions are further solidified.

## 5. A RIVER ASSAULT

The Lys River near Warneton is 14-18m (45-60ft) wide and up to 1.5m (5ft) deep, making it difficult and treacherous to cross. Dismounted cavalry attacks fail to dislodge the main German defences along the waterway, and as a result, the Allied cavalry in Warneton eventually pull out of the town during the night of 17 October.

## 6. THE RIVER LINE HOLDS

Cavalry attacks against the Germans along the Lys River resume on the morning of October 18, but little progress is made against the strong German defensive position. From Deulemont north to the rail centre of Tenbrielen, the Germans hold firm, and the major actions of the Battle of Messines eventually come to a close without a definitive result.

# THE BATTLE OF ARMENTIÈRES

13 OCTOBER - 2 NOVEMBER 1914

British forces established a continuous Allied line to the North Sea during the prelude to the Battle of Ypres

## 1. TWO BRITISH CORPS IN CONCERT

In mid-October, the British III Corps advances toward Bailleul and Armentières near the left flank of II Corps, marching toward Lille. Supported by the Cavalry Corps, III Corps is to reach the Armentières-Wytschaete line, advancing as far as Ypres. Proposed relief of II Corps by French forces linking with III Corps fails to materialise, endangering their advance.

## 2. GERMANS DEFEND HIGH GROUND

Three divisions of the German IV Cavalry Corps occupy high ground from Mont Kemmel to Mont des Cats, blocking the British line of advance. Undeterred, the British Cavalry Corps takes Mont des Cats on 12 October and continue to move forward over the next day.

## 3. FIGHT AT LA COURONNE

On 13 October, the III Corps encounters German troops in strong defensive positions at Meterenbecque and launch an attack stretching from La Couronne to Fontaine Houck in bad weather that afternoon. Despite suffering heavy casualties, the British manage to capture Meteren and Outtersteene as the German defenders withdraw from the area.

## 4. TO THE SEA

Bad weather delays follow-up III Corps attacks, but forward movement reveals that the Germans have abandoned Bailleul altogether and retired to the east bank of the notoriously difficult-to-cross Lys River. Meanwhile, the Allies establish a continuous line to the North Sea. The III Corps links up with British cavalry at Romarin.

## 5. ACROSS THE LYS

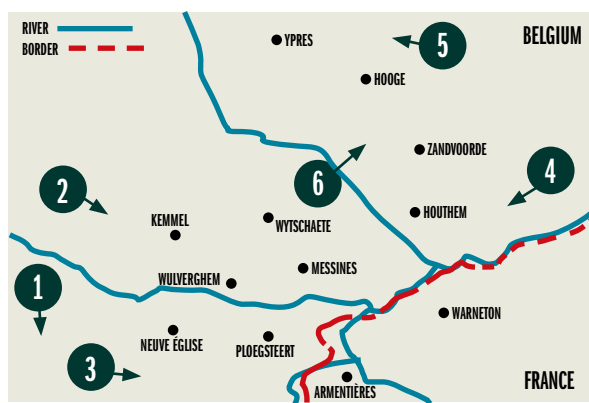
On 16 October, British troops cross the Lys River while German counterattacks begin in the vicinity of Dixmude. The British manage to occupy Armentières, and two days later, the III Corps is ordered to attack down the valley of the Lys during the major French and British Expeditionary Force offensive on the Western Front.

## 6. DIGGING IN

The Allied offensive makes gradual but steady headway until substantial German entrenchments are encountered beyond Perenchies Ridge, which puts a sudden stop to the Allied advance. Allied infantry is ordered to dig in on the night of 18 October, while the III Corps occupies the line west of Lille. A stalemate is reached, one that will eventually lead to unspeakable loss of life.



**ABOVE** A French artillery crew services a 75mm field gun during the Battle of Armentières and the race to the sea





# FIRST BATTLE OF YPRES

19 OCTOBER - 30 NOVEMBER 1914

Germany's hopes for a swift and total victory would founder in the rubble of this ancient city

**T**he ancient town of Ypres was no stranger to bloodshed before WWI, but the maelstrom of violence that swirled around it over the course of six blood-soaked weeks toward the end of 1914 was without parallel. The cobbled streets of a town once renowned for its linen would prove to be the graveyard of many Allied and German soldiers, along with any hopes for a swift end to the war.

At 39 kilometres (24 miles) from the North Sea, Ypres was directly in the path of the Imperial German Army as it prepared to unleash its Schlieffen Plan, a manoeuvre that would see it sweep through northern Belgium, past the formidable Maginot Line (a series of well-defended French forts) and down onto Paris. To achieve this the Germans had to take Ypres.

Incredibly, 8,000 German cavalrymen had cantered into Ypres on 7 October. Yet instead of thinking to occupy the town, Commander Gustav

von Hollen's IV Cavalry Corps emptied its treasury, bought as much as they could carry and departed the following day, only to be replaced by the British on 14 October.

Known to the British as 'Wipers', the first BEF troops had arrived following the fall of Antwerp. With neither side able to outflank the other by winning the race to the sea, the Germans were now faced with the prospect of having to storm Ypres in order to secure a route towards the ports of Calais and Dunkirk.

Having commenced their assault on 19 October, the German 4th Army initially enjoyed success, the early, fluid exchanges suiting their preference for *bewegungskrieg* (mobile warfare). On 24 October they launched no less than 15 separate attacks that eventually saw them cross the Yser River, and despite the arrival of reinforcements in the form of the French 42nd Division, the Belgian Army began to retreat, only halting their withdrawal when King Albert I intervened. This, combined with the

opening of sluice gates that flooded of the area between the river and the nearby railway station, helped to stymie the German advance.

While their comrades had been pushing across the water, soldiers belonging to the German 4th and 6th Armies had been engaged in ferocious fighting to the northeast of Ypres in Langemarck. Despite holding their ground, the British IV corps and their French companions were in dire need of reinforcement, which arrived on 21 October in the form of Douglas Haig's I Corps.

To the north, the French were faring no better, having dug into their positions around the Yser, but with British support disaster was averted and a number of positions reclaimed. However, a full-throated assault on the French 7th Division in Gheluvelt on 25-26 October threatened to smash the weakening Allied line. The ultimate failure of this attack saw the German advance falter.

The Germans were making little progress, and any gains were paid for dearly. By early-November



British troops in silhouette march towards trenches near Ypres at the Western Front during WWI

they had lost 80,000 men, with the BEF having suffered similar casualties. The Belgians and French had bled the most, the former losing half of their men.

With winter setting in the fighting was reduced to local exchanges, both sides shattered by the titanic tussle. Realising the futility of sending

more men into the charnel house that Ypres had become, Albrecht, Duke of Wurttemberg ordered the German 4th Army to halt all further attacks on 17 November.

The First Battle of Ypres was the last major engagement on the Western Front in 1914, and it preceded a period in which both sides set to

entrenching themselves and preparing for the slog ahead. Had the Germans prevailed it would have been catastrophic for the Allies, their sea communications and wider theatre operations gravely endangered by a German presence in the North Sea. But the Allies had held out, and in doing so dealt a fatal blow to German hopes of victory.

# FIRST BATTLE OF YPRES

The fight for the Channel ports

## 1. GERMAN DESIRE

The Germans dearly wanted the war to be over by Christmas 1914, but the Allies were about to engage them in a major battle at the Belgian town of Ypres.

## 2. BEYOND YPRES

At stake were the Channel ports that, if Ypres was to fall into German hands, would effectively hand them control of the sea. For the Germans, it was also a way into Flanders and then France.

## 3. ANTWERP AND YPRES

The Germans had captured the city of Antwerp, which is why Belgium's forces and the BEF had retreated to Ypres. But thanks to the race to the sea, Haig's I Corps had moved from the Aisne and arrived at Ypres.

## 4. NIEUPOORT

The Germans wanted to capture Calais, Dunkirk and Boulogne. They fought through lines at the Yser River held by the French,

overwhelming the Belgians who flooded a 3.2km (2mi)-wide stretch of water.

## 5. NARROWED FOCUS

The Germans decided to concentrate efforts on a small area and on 31 October pushed on again with a focus on the front between Messines and Gheluvelt.

## 6. A BIG PUSH

The Germans took Messines Ridge as well as the towns of Wytschaete and Messines in fierce fighting.

An assault on the British Expeditionary Forces to the north was repelled, though, with the German forces failing to take much advantage of their temporary breakthrough.

## 7. ALLIED ATTEMPTS

In early November more Allied soldiers were sent to Ypres. The Germans did the same and attacked on 11 November but were repelled by the British.

## 8. BIG LOSSES

The battle led to huge losses for the Allied forces, forcing eventual conscription. Ypres remained in Allied hands.

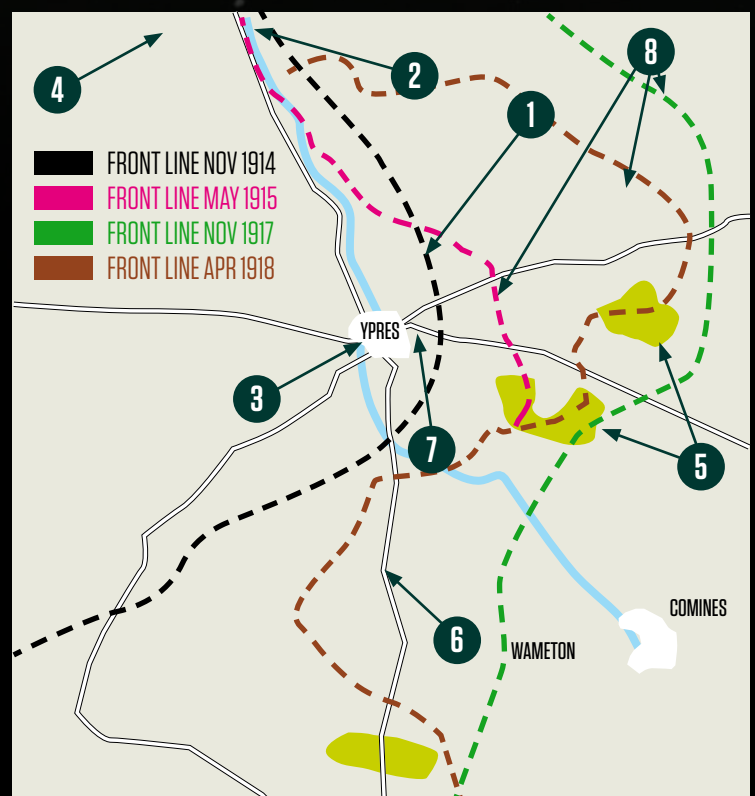
GERMAN 60% ALLIES

Main weapon used: Field gun

German casualties: 46,765

Allied casualties: 163,000

Did you know? The Battle of Ypres became known as the Kindermord, or Battle of the Innocents – one of those said to be affected by what he saw was Adolf Hitler





# 1915

## 36 THE SECOND BATTLE OF YPRES

How innovations in warfare reshaped the landscape of WWI

## 40 THE GALLIPOLI CAMPAIGN

With deadlock on the Western Front, Britain was about to expose the Ottoman 'soft underbelly of Europe' to its new fighting force, the ANZACs

## 50 THE BATTLE OF ARTOIS

Discover the forgotten French battle to capture Vimy Ridge, two years before the famous Canadian triumph

## 58 THE BATTLE OF LOOS

The largest British offensive of the Great War so far brought with it a number of terrible records: the bloodening of the volunteers of 1914, Britain's first use of poison gas, and a horrific casualty rate to rival the Somme









**GAS VICTIM**

The chlorine gas used by the Germans at Ypres was denser than the atmosphere, meaning it quickly flooded the British trenches. The casualty rate inflicted by the gas was high, with many soldiers suffering painful deaths.

**NOT PRESSING THE ADVANTAGE**

Despite successfully causing large amounts of damage to the Allied forces, the Germans were slow to press the advantage, so as a result didn't gain as much ground as they could have done.

**WAR DEAD**

Thanks in large part to the use of gas, the Second Battle of Ypres saw a high amount of casualties on both sides. The Allies saw over 70,000 lost, while the German total was around half that at 35,000.



**HOLDING THE LINE**

Despite the devastating assaults levelled upon them by the German forces, the Allied troops managed to stay strong for the most part, staving off defeat, but losing some of the tactical advantage of high ground.

# THE SECOND BATTLE OF YPRES

21 APRIL - 25 MAY 1915

**W**hen recalling some of the hugely destructive trench-warfare battles of World War I, Ypres is one of the first names that comes to mind. While the First Battle of 1914 stands out due to the catastrophic death toll, the Second Battle retains historical significance for a different – but equally sinister – reason: it marked the first use of poison gas in battle on the Western Front.

The first instance of its use happened at the start of the Battle of Gravenstafel – the first of six smaller battles that collectively form the larger Second Battle of Ypres. After first shelling the French territorial and Algerian/Moroccan forces with howitzer fire, the German troops unleashed their 5,700 canisters' worth of chlorine gas, carried toward the Allies by the prevailing winds.

Its impact was instant and catastrophic. Of the 10,000 troops, around 6,000 were dead within minutes. When combined with water, chlorine becomes acidic – in the process destroying the eyes and lungs. The surviving French troops scattered, leaving a seven-kilometre (4.3-mile)-wide gap for the Germans to advance through.

However, the German forces became victims of their own success. Not anticipating the effectiveness of gas, much of their reserves had been transferred west to the Russian front. Coupled with their weariness of possible Allied traps and the adverse effects of the still-lingering gas, they advanced slowly. Their reticence gave the Allied troops time to counter-attack, successfully driving the German troops back, but not without casualties.

Having seen the brutal efficiency of gas as a weapon, the Germans used it again – this time on 24 April at the Battle of St Julien against Canadian forces. Again, the losses were heavy, although despite being pushed back, the Canadian troops managed to hold on, having developed the method of holding urine-soaked rags to their faces in order to counteract the effects of the gas. British reinforcements arrived on 3 May, by which point the Allies had suffered around 1,000 fatalities.

After the Allied troops fell back closer to the town of Ypres – recognising that only a large-scale assault would push the Germans back, something they didn't at that time have the manpower to commit – the battle recommenced on 8 May. Although the Germans were able to occupy Frezenberg Ridge and continued to inflict devastating assaults on the Allied forces, they managed to hold the line.

A further assault at Bellewaarde on 24 May by the German forces (again by poison gas) forced the Allied troops to withdraw and retreat by about a kilometre (0.6 miles). Prevented from making further advances due to a lack of personnel and supplies, they instead resorted to bombing the town – by the battle's end, Ypres was little more than a pile of rubble.

The death tolls make for particularly dire reading: the combined Allied forces experienced around 70,000 casualties; the Germans 35,000. Furthermore, the effectiveness of gas as a weapon had been clearly and brutally demonstrated. Although its use was widely condemned, the British adopted its use, putting it into effect at Loos later that year. Thus, the after-effects of one of the bloodiest battles of the war would continue to linger on.







## ALLIED ARMY

### TROOPS EIGHT

### DIVISIONS

### CASUALTIES 70,000



## GENERAL SIR HORACE SMITH-DORRIEN

### LEADER

On 6 May, Smith-Dorrien was relieved from duty by General French, replaced with Herbert Plumer.

**Strengths** Very organised and pragmatic decision-maker.

**Weakness** Poor relationship with commanding officer led to his ultimate dismissal.



## ALLIED SOLDIER

### KEY UNIT

The Allied Army comprised British, French, Canadian and African forces, with soldiers from other Commonwealth countries.

**Strengths** Included the well-trained British Expeditionary Force.

**Weakness** Defending a vulnerable position; couldn't defend against gas.



## HOWITZER

### KEY WEAPON

Faced with gas attacks and long-range artillery assaults, the British replied with fire of their own.

**Strengths** Long range and potentially devastating.

**Weakness** Found themselves in a tactically inferior position, which reduced effectiveness.

## 01 UNSUCCESSFUL GAS ATTACK

The German troops carry around 5,730 gas canisters – each weighing 41kg (90lb) – into battle by hand. They are opened and operated by hand, and rely on the wind direction directing the poisonous clouds toward the enemy combatants. This method of execution is far from foolproof, with a number of German troops managing to injure or kill themselves in the process. The first three attempts at dispersal are unsuccessful.

## 02 SUCCESSFUL GAS ATTACK

The Allied troops' luck doesn't hold. At about 5pm on 22 April, having been successfully unleashed by the German forces, a cloud of chlorine gas descends on a number of battalions, with the Algerian and French forces the worst affected. There are around 6,000 instant casualties, with the majority of the rest of them abandoning their positions in their desperation to get away from the gas.

## 03 GERMANS ADVANCE

The retreating Allied forces leave the way clear for the German forces to advance into the now-unoccupied territory, which they do at around 5.15pm. Moving 3-4km into French territory, they capture Pilckem Ridge by the village of Pilckem, achieving their first objective of the battle.

## 04 GERMANS ESTABLISH BRIDGEHEADS

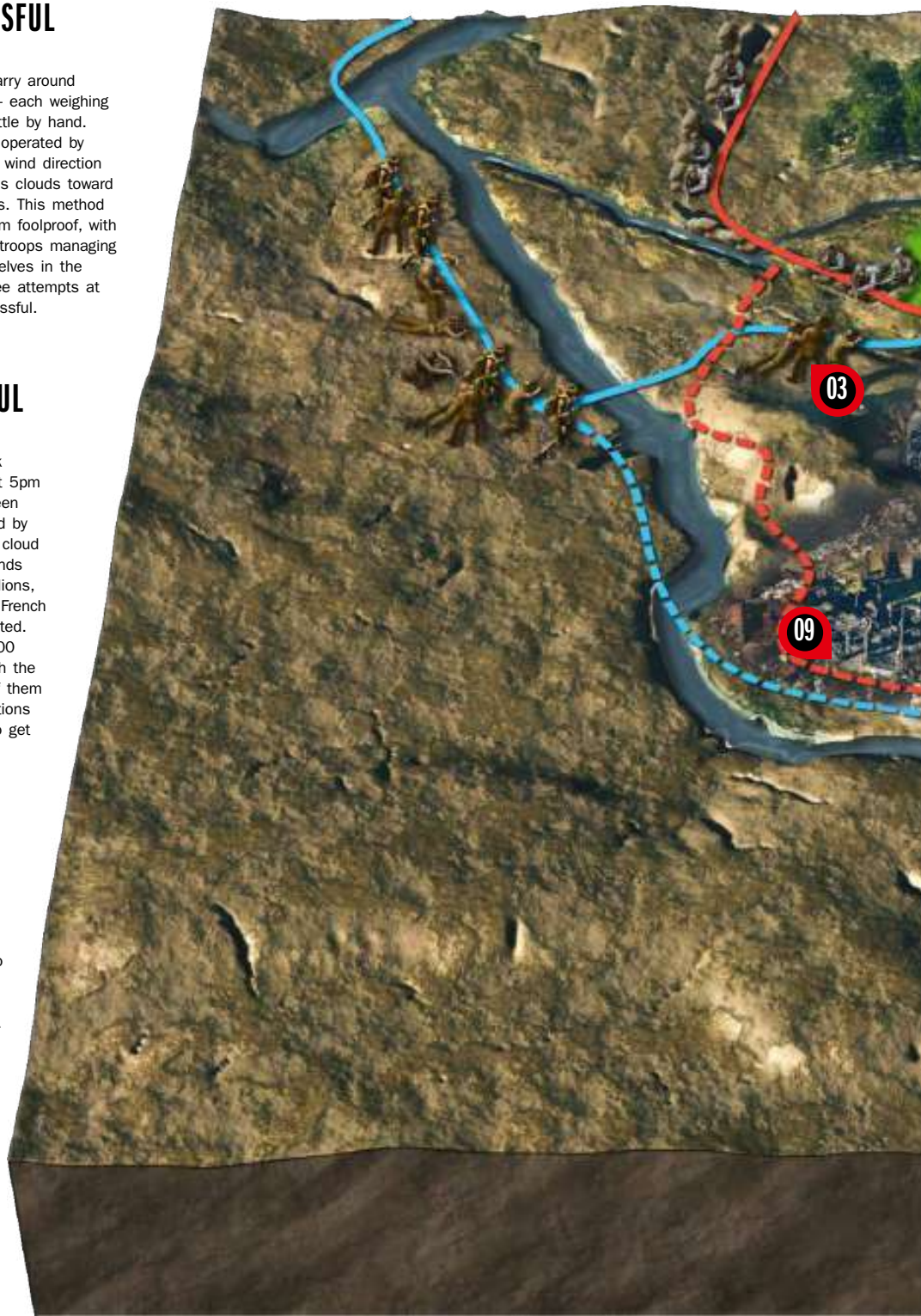
Many of the German reserves have been sent to fight on the Russian front, but they make use of what they have, with the 45th and 46th Reserve Divisions setting up bridgeheads by the Yser Canal at Steenstraat and Het Sas. They infiltrate a gap in the front line, with Ypres now exposed.

## 05 THE CANADIANS COUNTER-ATTACK

In danger of being exposed, the 13th Battalion of the 1st Canadian Division join up with some surviving French troops and launch a counter-attack on the left flank on the road between St Julien and Poelcappelle. In doing this, they successfully manage to halt the advance of the German 51st Reserve Division, preventing them from assisting with the main offensive.

## 06 LANGEMARCK CAPTURED

French soldiers occupying the village of Langemarck avoid the gas, but quickly find themselves overwhelmed by the German forces, who defeat them and capture the area.







## 10 GERMANS SHELL YPRES

Germans bombard the town of Ypres with artillery fire, with their aim of making it harder for the Allies to bring in reinforcements. By the time that they are done, Ypres has been heavily damaged.



## GERMAN ARMY

**TROOPS** SEVEN  
**DIVISIONS**

**CASUALTIES** 35,000



## ALBRECHT, DUKE OF WÜRTTEMBERG

### LEADER

The head of the German house of Württemberg was a decorated army general during WWI.

**Strengths** Previous experience of victory at the Battle of the Ardennes earlier in WWI.

**Weakness** His overly cautious nature cost him further advances.



## GERMAN SOLDIER

### KEY UNIT

The German forces came prepared, ready to use a deadly new weapon that would alter the game.

**Strengths** Possessed the tactical advantage of high ground.

**Weakness** Lacking sufficient numbers to complete their objective and win the campaign.



## CHLORINE GAS

### KEY WEAPON

The first time it was used in a large-scale offensive assault was in the protracted Second Battle of Ypres.

**Strengths** Devastatingly effective, difficult to defend against.

**Weakness** Dangerous to carry - wind blowing in the wrong direction can make it fatal to friendly forces.

## 07 FRENCH COUNTER-ATTACK HALTED

Six companies of the French 7th Battalion Zouaves make another counter-attack at about 8pm from Boesinghe, crossing the Yser Canal in the direction of Pilckem. They eventually come into contact with German forces, but despite several hours of fighting, little progress is made.

## 08 CANADIANS ATTACK AGAIN

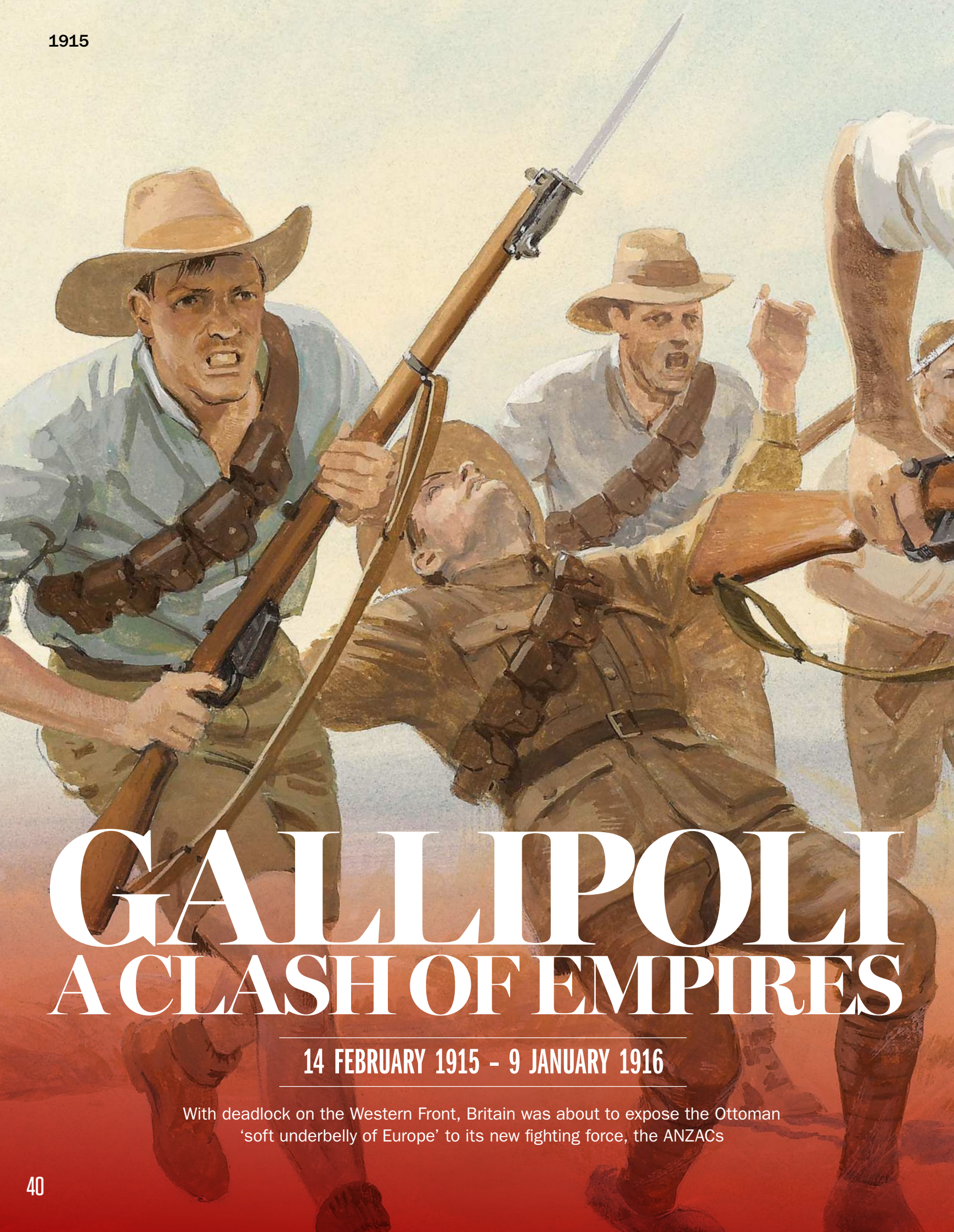
After the failure of the French assault, the Canadian 3rd Infantry Brigade plan another assault for 11.30pm. This is later postponed, before commencing again in the early hours of 23 April.

## 09 GERMANS HALT ADVANCE

By around 8.30pm on 23 April, the German forced cease their assault. This is partly because they have already achieved one of their main objectives of capturing Pilckem Ridge - which is on high ground and thus a tactically advantageous spot - but also because they lack the manpower to sustain a continuous assault, despite having wreaked a high casualty rate on the Allied forces.



1915



# GALLIPOLI

## A CLASH OF EMPIRES

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14 FEBRUARY 1915 - 9 JANUARY 1916

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With deadlock on the Western Front, Britain was about to expose the Ottoman 'soft underbelly of Europe' to its new fighting force, the ANZACs





**L**ooking out onto the shoreline, Lieutenant-General William Birdwood knew that this would be a risk. Gallipoli, which was once Britain's foolproof plan in the fight against the might of the Central Powers, was fast becoming a disaster and the commander of the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) had been entrusted with turning the tide of the flailing campaign.

The landings began on 25 April 1915 and were designed to take the heat off the British divisions up and down the coast. As the fleet of transports neared the beaches, many were picked off by

the Ottoman machine gunners before they even made it to land. For those that did make it out of the boats, they were faced with steep cliffs and a relentless, ferocious enemy led by Colonel Mustafa Kemal, the future Atatürk and 'father' of modern Turkey. Within a short space of time it was clear that this was going to be no easy battle.

For a campaign that was meant to end the stalemate on the Western Front, progression was remarkably slow and trenches were soon constructed. The Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC) would lose hundreds of soldiers in the first few days as they dug in to protect a small beachhead and await orders.



## A READY AND WILLING FORCE

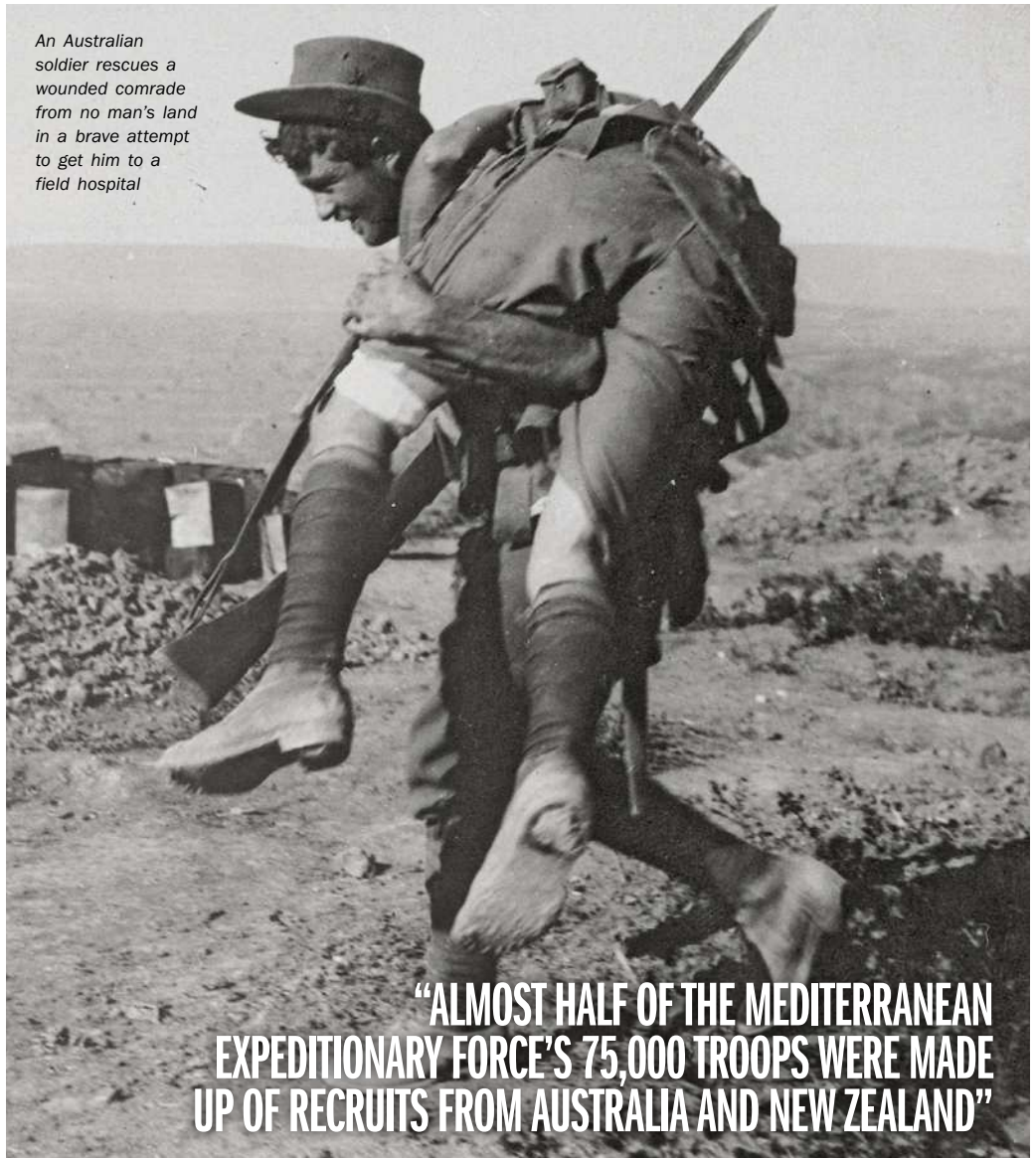
Rewind to late 1914 and the picture is a very different one for the ANZAC soldiers. Rather than facing the mud of northern France like the majority of the British Army, the corps was training on the sands of the Sahara desert. With training and accommodation facilities in short supply back in England, this was deemed the best place to get the ANZAC troops prepared for the heat of battle.

Eagerly awaiting deployment, the war effort was actually very popular in Australasia. Australian Prime Minister Joseph Cook pledged his support to Britain and many rushed to be recruited for the army, as they didn't want to miss out. Many even lied about their ages to become part of this high-paid job that will, of course, be over by Christmas. Australia promised 20,000 men to the cause and raised the AIF. New Zealand weren't far behind and the 8,454-strong New Zealand Expeditionary Force (NZEF) left Wellington in October 1914, eager to join the fighting. After their arrival, the NZEF troops were pressed into action in the Suez Canal, where they helped quash an Ottoman raid on the important waterway. Fast forward to April 1915 and the wheels were now in motion for the ANZAC deployment from Egypt to Turkey. Gallipoli and glory beckoned. Or so they thought.

Almost half of the Mediterranean Expeditionary Force's (MEF) 75,000 troops were made up of recruits from Australia and New Zealand. Saddled with a 40-kilogram pack of equipment, the ANZAC troops entered the lion's den of ANZAC Cove on that fateful day in April 1915 and established a beachhead against the opposing Ottomans.

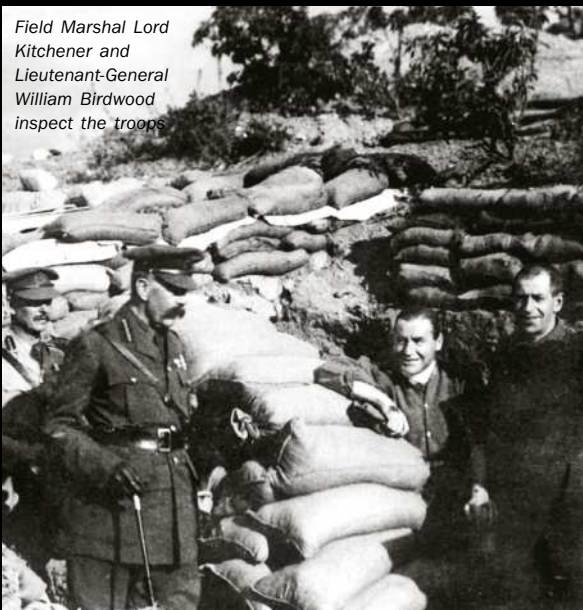
The peaceful way of life back home seemed far away and a hot summer was on the horizon. As the troops were tormented by the Turkish heat and swarms of insects, they now realised this was what war was really like.

*An Australian soldier rescues a wounded comrade from no man's land in a brave attempt to get him to a field hospital*



**"ALMOST HALF OF THE MEDITERRANEAN EXPEDITIONARY FORCE'S 75,000 TROOPS WERE MADE UP OF RECRUITS FROM AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND"**

*Field Marshal Lord Kitchener and Lieutenant-General William Birdwood inspect the troops*



## WHY ATTACK GALLIPOLI?

The risky operation full of promise that backfired spectacularly for the British Empire

Gallipoli was a failure for the British and is remembered for the frequent blunders made by the Allied hierarchy and the spirited defence of the peninsula by the Ottomans.

The campaign was the brainchild of Winston Churchill - then First Lord of the Admiralty - who desired a second front against the Central Powers. A surge through the 'soft underbelly of Europe' would weaken the German and Austrian lines on the Western and Eastern Fronts. It was believed that this would be a quick-fix for the deadlock in Europe.

The campaign began on 19 February 1915 with the mighty Royal Navy sailing into the Dardanelles, a strait on the west

coast of Turkey, with the aim of bombarding and capturing Constantinople.

The poor weather and tougher-than-expected Turkish fortifications damaged the Royal Navy considerably and three battleships were sunk in the process of arriving. Army assistance, including the ANZAC troops, was called in by April but could only establish small footholds as the Ottomans defended doggedly.

This stalemate would drag on for a number of months as offensives continually proved ineffectual. In December 1915, British command decided that enough was enough and pulled the troops out of the region. It was back to the Western Front for more bloodshed.



# ANZAC RECRUIT

## Citizen soldiers of the Empire

The British Army incorporated a large contingent of troops from all over the empire to swell its ranks. The Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC) were stationed in Egypt ready for action in Gallipoli.

### BAYONET

A bayonet was attached to the end of the rifle for close-quarters combat. The Ottomans carried swords and lances, so this blade could be invaluable when low on ammunition.

### EQUIPMENT

A standard ANZAC soldier would carry on their Sam Browne belt: a revolver holster, ammo pouch, sword frog, compass, binoculars, map case, shovel haversack and water bottle.

### RIFLE

The rifle of choice for an ANZAC soldier was the trusty bolt-action Lee Enfield MK I rifle. These were wielded by the main infantry, while officers carried revolvers.

### MOUNTED RIFLES HAT

Known as the 'slouch hat', the New Zealand version here was slightly different to its Australian counterpart and nicknamed 'the lemon squeezer'. A different coloured cloth band denoted rank and service branch.

### UNIFORM

Khaki was the order of the day and helped the ANZAC troops stay concealed in the heat of the Turkish sun. The New Zealand uniform was actually slightly greener than British versions.

### RATIONS

On average, 30kg of rations would be carried. The most common foods were bully beef, hard biscuits, tea, sugar and beef cubes. They would also carry firewood and spare clothing.

### THE TROOPS DIG IN

Life on ANZAC Cove was harsh and painfully repetitive. The daily routine on the tiny six-kilometre bay consisted of observing and sniping enemy positions with the occasional bombing run. Life behind the frontline saw support trenches ferry supplies to the front. Despite their perilous situation, it's known that to unwind the Australians swam in the warm waters of the Aegean Sea. Life was especially difficult for the Australian Army Medical Corps (AAMC), who were often undermanned and undersupplied. Fresh water was scarce and the craving for it was heightened by the diet of salty bully beef and dry biscuits.

One of the most famous men of the AAMC was John Simpson, who led a stretcher-carrying donkey around the battlefield to pick up the injured. Despite medical staff's best efforts, typhoid and dysentery were common and these, along with poor nutrition, wore down the ANZAC troops.

Between April and August 1915, neither the Ottomans nor the ANZAC forces were able to break the deadlock. Trench warfare unfolded and, unlike the British hierarchy had hoped, the ANZAC divisions were unable to break through.

### MAXIM MACHINE GUN

The Maxim boasted an excellent fire rate but was soon replaced by the more reliable Vickers and Hotchkiss guns. Machine guns were a new type of warfare that would try to end the stalemate of the trenches.

### GARLAND TRENCH MORTAR

The most-used mortar of the Gallipoli campaign, the Garland proved useful at clearing enemy trenches. Projectiles were aimed using a telescope and sent in at a 45-degree angle using a powder charge.





## INGENUITY MAY SAVE THE DAY

In early May, the New Zealand Infantry Brigade was tasked with a new objective that would hopefully outmanoeuvre the resolute Ottomans. The brigade was taken south to Helles, where British divisions were engaged in combat. Their mission was an assault on the village of Krithia that would join the British forces up with the ANZAC contingent. Progress was initially encouraging but the advance soon turned into a series of battles; 800 men were lost.

The ANZAC contribution to the war effort wasn't limited to the frontline. Lurking in the straits was an Australian submarine by the name of AE2, which constantly harassed the Ottoman Navy deep inside its territory. Sinking destroyers, battleships and gunboats, the AE2 eventually ran out of luck on 30 April when it was sunk by an Ottoman torpedo boat after trying to rendezvous with a British submarine. Captain Henry Stoker was left with no option but to scuttle the vessel and the 35-man crew were captured as prisoners of war.

Back on the rocky heights of ANZAC Cove, the remainder of the Australasian corps was struggling against the Turkish defenses. Traversing the cliffs while dodging machine gun fire was a fruitless

exercise, especially as the defenders were being constantly reinforced.

The periscope rifle was one invention that made life easier for the ANZAC troops. Devised by Sergeant William Beach of the 2nd Battalion of the AIF, mirrors were attached to the sight of a rifle allowing soldiers to have a view above the trench without sticking their head in the Ottoman crosshairs. String was also attached so the trigger could be pulled without their hands getting in the line of fire.

There was also the jam tin bomb. Crudely made, this was another excellent improvisation from the ANZACs and was simply an old tin filled with whatever explosives they could get their hands on. All in all it was a plucky invention that saw extended use on the frontline.

On 15 May, the ANZACs lost their chief of general staff when Major General WT Bridges was shot by an Ottoman sniper. This was followed by a huge Ottoman push of 42,000 men on 18 May that was repulsed by the ANZAC forces. Reinforcements in the shape of the Australian 2nd and 3rd Light Horse Brigade arrived but there was still no release from the cove. Despite the ANZAC's best efforts, there was seemingly no way of ending the stalemate.

## "FRESH WATER WAS PARTICULARLY SCARCE AND THE CRAVING FOR IT WAS HEIGHTENED BY THE DIET OF SALTY BULLY BEEF AND DRY BISCUITS"



## THE BATTLE OF LONE PINE 6-9 AUGUST 1915

If there was any chance of the August Offensive working, this feint, 100 metres above Anzac Cove, would have to succeed

By August 1915, the ANZAC regiments were already an integral part of the British force. Their mission on this day was to draw the Ottoman armies away from Chunuk Bair to give the August Offensive a chance of succeeding. The ANZAC artillery barrage ceased at 5.30pm. Battle was about to begin.

### 02 TRENCH DEFENCE

In a flash the ANZAC troops reached the shocked Ottoman encampment. The ANZAC soldiers were then surprised themselves as the trenches were roofed with pine logs. Unable to force their way in and unsure of what to do, many soldiers became sitting ducks and were shot down.

### 01 BREAKOUT

On the shores of the Aegean Sea, Allied regional Commander in Chief Sir Ian Hamilton established a line and called an end to the artillery barrage. At 5.30pm, 4,600 Australians from the 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th Battalions charged the Ottoman positions on Hill 971 with the sun on their backs.



**ABOVE** Australian infantry after the battle. Ottoman bodies can be seen strewn across the top of the trench

**LEFT** Troops would carry up to 40kg of supplies with them when they travelled, including food and spare clothing



## 04 VICTORY IN THE DARK

Some men avoided the trenches altogether and headed for the communication and reserve trenches to the rear. The others scored massive gains in the Ottoman trenches and by 6pm, half an hour after the first whistle was blown, the ANZAC troops had taken control and rooted out the Ottoman resistance.

## 07 VICTORY

Joined now by the 5th, 6th, 7th, 8th and 12th Battalions, the ANZAC forces had succeeded in drawing in the whole immediate Ottoman 16th Division reserve as the enemy retreated. Up to 10,000 (3,000 ANZAC, 7,000 Ottoman) had perished in just four days and seven Victoria Crosses were awarded to the brave ANZAC troops.

## 05 TUNNELLED ASSAULT

Australian engineers dug across no man's land to give reinforcements a safe passage. The Ottomans then came back in force and four days and nights of hand-to-hand fighting began. It was so close quarters that often firearms could not be used and the weapons of choice were unfixed bayonets and fists.

## 06 ANZACS SEIZE THE ADVANTAGE

Struggles were usually one on one with friendly fire from both sides common in the darkness of the trenches. Tin bombs and Stielhandgranate were thrown back and forth. The trenches were soon piled up with bodies but the ANZAC soldiers had gained the upper hand and were beginning to push the Ottomans back.

## 03 ENTRY

In desperation, the ANZAC soldiers shot, bombed and bayoneted through the timber roofs as they scrambled into the trenches. The fighting became close quarters and each ANZAC wore a white armband to tell friend from foe. In the maze of trenches, both sides dashed around corners and fired wildly as chaos erupted.

## THE ENEMY IN DETAIL

### The gallipoli campaign from the other side of the lines

By the outbreak of the war, the Ottomans were in no fit state for another conflict. After losing land and money in the First and Second Balkan War, they were described as the 'sick man of Europe'. The Ottomans had originally desired an alliance with Britain but this was rebuffed. Impressed with Germany's growing power, they eventually sided with the Central Powers.

The Empire had a long-standing rivalry with Russia and were determined to access Russian seaports. Their assault on Russia's Black Sea

ports inadvertently caused the Gallipoli campaign as the Russians appealed for support from their allies.

The straits of Dardanelles were littered with mines that wreaked havoc with the Royal Navy's ships. What the British didn't know, however, was that the naval bombardment had nearly eradicated all of the Ottoman troops in the area. The withdrawal allowed commander Mustafa Kemal to bring in five corps worth of reinforcements from the Fifth Army to bolster Ottoman strength.

The army put out by the Ottoman Empire at Gallipoli was heavily reliant on assistance from Germany and Austria. They had borrowed the idea of khaki uniforms from them and now wore a kabalak rather than the traditional Turkish fez.

The Empire had very little munitions of their own so both the infantry and cavalry wielded either

the Mauser 1893 or Gewehr 88 rifle, again provided by the Germans. The Ottomans on the peninsula also had swords, pistols and lances as well as Stielhandgranate, a grenade commonly associated with Germany.





**“AS WE CAPTURED LONE PINE WE FELT LIKE WILD BEASTS AND AS FAST AS OUR MEN WENT DOWN ANOTHER WOULD TAKE HIS PLACE BUT SOON THE WOUNDED WERE PILED UP THREE OR FOUR DEEP AND THE MOANS OF OUR POOR FELLOWS AND ALSO THE TURKS WE TRAMPED ON WAS AWFUL.”**

Private Tom Billings



*A group of Australian troops bravely charging head-on at an Ottoman trench*







# THE EVACUATION FROM THE COVE

The bloodshed had gone on for too long and by November 1915, it was time to withdraw from ANZAC Cove

After the loss of Hill 60 on 29 August 1915, commanders decided that withdrawal was now the only option available to the British. The idea of reinforcement and navy barrage

was toyed with but on 13 November Lord Kitchener observed ANZAC Cove and declared an imminent evacuation. The ANZAC role in Gallipoli was over.

## 01 PREPARATION FOR DEPARTURE

The ANZAC troops had heard rumours of an evacuation so, to maintain order, the commanders informed their troops that they were heading to Lemnos, Greece, for a rest. To prepare for this false journey, the military stores were emptied of all supplies. The infantry remained suspicious.

## 04 REDUCING THE GARRISON

Beginning on 15 December, 36,000 ANZAC soldiers were withdrawn over five nights. Troops were evacuated in small batches and unneeded ammunition was buried or destroyed. Machine gunners were left to the final night due to their heavy loads of equipment. The riflemen departed, setting up drip rifles as they went.

## 03 DELAYS AND UNREST

The few troops remaining now left meant that the Ottomans could break through within a week if the evacuation was not complete. Worse still, a blizzard battered the shoreline on 7 December making evacuation extremely difficult. The ANZAC morale was low as they realised they were leaving the fallen behind.

## 02 SILENT STUNTS

From late November onwards it was declared that no artillery fire or sniping would be allowed. The belief was that the Ottomans would see this as the ANZAC preparing for winter rather than a withdrawal. Irregular rifle fire kept the enemy unaware of any scale back in strength.

## 06 FINAL PHASE

The evacuation was designed and prepared by officers who knew exactly what was best for their men. By 20 December the withdrawal from ANZAC Cove was complete without a single loss of life. More than 10,000 ANZACs were killed in the campaign, so the safe removal of a total of 105,000 men and 300 field guns was a huge relief to all.

## 05 EVACUATION IN FULL FLOW

More and more transports arrived to ferry the troops to safety. First in the pecking order were support troops and reserves. The fighting units were removed gradually so they could keep fighting the battle and provoking the Ottoman lines. By 19 December, only 10,000 troops remained.

## THE ANZAC LEGACY

The ANZAC's heroism and bravery at Gallipoli lives on to this day

A celebration of the wartime spirit shown by soldiers from Australia and New Zealand, the first ANZAC Day was in 1916 and has been going ever since, with marches and services throughout the two countries. The day begins at dawn on 25 April, the date that ANZAC troops first landed on the peninsula. Rosemary is traditionally worn as it was commonly found on the battlefields at Gallipoli. There is also a tradition of making the ANZAC biscuit to remember the rations sent from home to the frontline. A special year for the remembrance was 1990, when veterans went back to the site of the battles to commemorate the 75th anniversary.

## "AN ARMISTICE TOOK PLACE ON 24 MAY SO BOTH SIDES COULD COLLECT THE FALLEN THAT NOW LITTERED THE BATTLEFIELD"

### FAILURE AFTER FAILURE

A hastily arranged armistice took place on 24 May so both sides could collect the fallen that now littered the battlefield. The ceasefire lasted from 7.30am to 4.30pm before the fighting resumed for another few months. Something had to give and by August, the British commanders had a new idea – the August Offensive.

One of the first of these new engagements was the Battle of the Nek on 7 August 1915. The Australian 3rd Horse Brigade was entrusted with an advance on a thin strip of land known as the Nek. Here, there were a number of Turkish trenches that, if taken, would represent a significant foothold for the British. The attack began at 4.30am with support from an offshore destroyer that provided an artillery barrage.

Unfortunately, in one of the many miscalculations that seemed to happen at Gallipoli so frequently, the bombardment was unleashed seven minutes early and the Ottomans had time to shelter and then return to their positions ready for the cavalry charge.

In a scene reminiscent of the Charge of the Light Brigade, the Ottoman machine gun fire cut down the cavalry and infantry. More than 300 died in the massacre with next to no territorial gain. While the Australians were led to the slaughter at Nek, the New Zealanders were facing problems of their own at Chunuk Bair, a 13-day struggle to the summit of the Sari Bair ridge.

After fierce resistance on the ascent, the New Zealanders arrived to find the peak deserted and the Wellington and Auckland Battalions were



forced to hold off a renewed Ottoman advance on the top at dawn on 8 August. Under increasing pressure from artillery strikes and machine gun fire, the stubborn New Zealanders were eventually bailed out by incoming British troops, who themselves were soon taken out by a mass Ottoman counterattack.

Later in the month, the Battle of Hill 60 on 21 August proved to be just as disastrous for both Australian and New Zealand soldiers. After the failures at Nek and Chunuk Bair, this battle represented the last throw of the dice for the weary divisions. The ANZAC troops managed to get among the maze of Ottoman trenches but were unable to force them out of their positions completely. With a distinct lack of ammunition and minimal artillery support, the attack soon lost momentum. The exhausted British lost up to 2,500 men as the Ottomans once again proved too strong.

The main British divisions were struggling themselves. Suvla Bay was a small, lightly defended enclave that was seen by the British as an ideal way to break the deadlock and finally hit the Ottomans where it hurt. Some 63,000 allied troops swarmed into the area and had massive gains but could not link up with ANZAC Cove before they were repulsed.

This was the final straw for Field Lord Marshal Kitchener who, after a visit, declared that evacuation was the only course of action for this long and costly campaign. Long-standing Commander in Chief Sir Ian Hamilton was replaced by Charles Munro as the evacuation programme got under way.

## A SUCCESSFUL EVACUATION

The ANZAC contingent had now been stationed at the cove for a number of months and it wasn't soon until winter would arrive in Gallipoli. Despite being exhausted, the decision to evacuate was kept from the ANZAC troops as long as possible. These troops had come halfway around the world and even though many were diseased and sick, the decision to retreat when they had made little to no territorial gain would crush morale.

The evacuation was covered up by a false restocking mission to Lemnos but whispers were frequent and by November the game was up. This was to be no quick withdrawal though. The evacuation was to be done in stages and in the most discreet way so the Ottomans did not suspect a thing.

By day the ANZACS would keep up their attacks as usual but by night, a careful retreat was devised. Small numbers would depart as the rest of the division fired sporadically to give the illusion the troops were still fighting. The entire evacuation took five days and was so well disguised that the Ottoman artillery bombarded the empty trenches for days afterwards.

The ANZAC forces lost 8,709 Australians and 2,701 New Zealanders at Gallipoli, with many

## "THEY EARNED A REPUTATION AS TOUGH FIGHTERS"



We speak to Dr Damien Fenton, honorary research fellow at Massey University in Wellington, New Zealand, about the ANZAC campaign

### WHAT WAS THE ROLE OF THE ANZACS IN THE CAMPAIGN?

The original role of the 30,000-strong ANZAC was to carry out a landing near Gaba Tepe and support the British landings at Cape Helles by advancing inland to capture the Sari Bair Range and Maltepe, thereby cutting the Ottoman lines of communication with their troops at Helles. Instead they landed at the wrong place – Ari Burnu (ANZAC Cove) – and ended up defending their tiny six kilometre squared beach head for the next three months while the British and French concentrated on trying to break out of Cape Helles.

In late July, the MEF's attention switched to the ANZAC enclave, which became the focal point of the Sari Bair Offensive in August. The ANZACS played a leading role in this ultimately doomed offensive and suffered accordingly – ANZAC casualties for between 6 and 10 August amount to 12,000. After more heavy fighting in late August to consolidate the link-up between ANZAC and Suvla, the ANZACS settled back into the daily grind of trench warfare to defend their now greatly expanded perimeter until the final evacuation in December.

### WHAT TECHNOLOGY, WEAPONS AND METHODS OF WARFARE WERE USED BY THE ANZACS?

The volunteer citizen-soldiers of the AIF and NZEF who served in Gallipoli in 1915 had been organised, trained and equipped on the basis of pre-war British Army regulations, albeit with a few local variations in uniform and

equipment. Infantry brigades predominated but both expeditionary forces contained a high proportion of mounted infantry regiments, Australian Light Horse and New Zealand Mounted Rifles accordingly.

The 25 April landing was an all-infantry affair with the mounted regiments arriving at ANZAC as reinforcements on 12 May, without their horses. The infantry and mounted troops from both Dominions soon earned a reputation as tough, aggressive fighters who quickly adapted to the conditions of trench warfare. Their field artillery batteries were equipped with modern 18-pounders and 4.5-inch howitzers, which, to the surprise of the ANZACS, made them better equipped than many of the British Territorial or New Army artillery batteries sent out to Gallipoli.

### HOW DID THE AUSTRALIAN UNITS DIFFER FROM THE NEW ZEALAND UNITS?

It was often hard for outsiders to distinguish the soldiers from the two Dominions, much to the annoyance of the New Zealanders, who usually found themselves mistaken for Australians. In 1914-15, the famous 'Aussie' slouch hat was actually also standard kit for most New Zealand infantry and mounted units. This changed when the NZEF adopted the 'lemon squeezer' felt hat as a deliberate effort to differentiate themselves from the AIF. In demeanour, the New Zealanders were often noted as being less boisterous than the Australians and more willing to take prisoners but in terms of fighting ability, there was nothing between them.

more, perhaps up to 20,000, wounded. The campaign was a complete failure but could have been so much worse for the British if it wasn't for the bravery and tenacity of these men from the other side of the globe.

In the grand scheme of things, Gallipoli was not a defining campaign, with events on the Western and Eastern Fronts much more significant in the fall of the Central Powers.

After the evacuation, the ANZACS went on to serve with distinction on the Western Front and many other theatres of war in World War I. The events of 1915 still live long in the memory of Australians, New Zealanders and also Turks.

The success of the campaign under future president Mustafa Kemal kick started a Turkish revival that gave a renewed sense of identity and helped aid the fall of the Ottoman Empire in the Turkish War of Independence. Back Down Under, remembering the sacrifice is an annual tradition and for two young countries, the experience bound them together.



This painting by Walter Armiger Bowring shows the ANZACs returning home

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1915

# THE SECOND BATTLE OF ARTOIS

9 MAY - 18 JUNE 1915

In this first of a two-part series, discover the forgotten French battle to capture Vimy Ridge, two years before the famous Canadian triumph

*A solitary French poilu walks through a ruined village on the route from Bethune to Arras, January 1916*





**D**rive along the road up from Neuville-Saint-Vaast into Souchez, a small town in between the imposing heights of Notre Dame de Lorette and Vimy Ridge, and as you enter you'll see on your left, next to a war memorial commemorating those who died in the Indochina Wars, a prominent statue of a man in World War I greatcoat and beret, leaning proudly forward underneath a winged victory.

The statue is in commemoration of General Ernest Barbot, commander of the 77th Division of Infantry, an elite alpine unit that stormed Vimy Ridge on 9 May 1915. They marched forward arm in arm with the Moroccan Division, another elite formation made up of long-service French regulars who had served in Morocco (not ethnic Moroccans) and Foreign Legion troops: mainly Greeks, Russians, Poles and Czechs.

Barbot was 59 at the time – old for a divisional commander. He had initially planned to retire early as a lieutenant-colonel (commanding the 159th regiment) in the years before the war broke out, but his life would change when a personal tragedy struck. In 1912, his wife and only child died in an accident. Distraught, he decided to devote the rest of his life to his beloved alpins.

Making colonel in 1914, Barbot was given command of the 159th and 97th alpine regiments, plus four battalions of chasseurs à pied, elite French light infantry. In October that year, this amalgam of elite soldiers

under Barbot's command was the only French formation holding its ground against a furious German onslaught, aimed at capturing Arras.

Barbot was seemingly everywhere at once during the desperate fight, demanding that his men hold on at all cost and declaring that the Germans would never enter Arras. Against all odds they held, and the Germans pulled back.

For his personal heroism and unflagging leadership, Ernest Barbot was promoted to the rank of general and declared the Saviour of Arras. The two regiments and four battalions that had served under him were amalgamated into a new division under his command: the 77th. Of course, that's not what the men called it. For them, the 77th would always be La Division Barbot.

The division kept Barbot's name even after his death on 9 May 1915, the same day his division advanced four and a half kilometres in just an hour and a half, their best day of the war. Barbot was killed within hours of launching the attack. His command post, sited just 400 metres from the German front line, suffered a direct hit from an artillery shell. His grave is now up on Notre Dame de Lorette, along with 40,000 other mostly French soldiers who fought and died to secure Vimy Ridge and Notre Dame de Lorette from 1914-18. If you go there you'll see it as you enter the cemetery from the southern carpark, with Vimy Ridge looking over your shoulder. Barbot's headstone is on your left, in the front row, pride of place.

In 1915, the French army made two attempts to capture Vimy Ridge: the Second (9 May – 18 June) and Third (25 September – 14 October) Battles of Artois. Of the two battles, the second was the larger and more successful (the third battle was primarily a feint to draw attention away from the main effort further south at the Second Battle of Champagne). Both were part of a frenzy of activity up and down the front in 1915, as the French furiously threw men at the Germans in lieu of throwing the shells, grenades, and mortars that were still being built.

Despite how unready the French were for the scale and character of the fighting they would endure on the Western Front from 1914-18, they nearly pulled off a historic victory in May 1915 with a well co-ordinated attack against Notre Dame de Lorette and Vimy Ridge.

In the centre of the attack was XXXIII CA (Corps d'armée) commanded by later Marshal of France, and later still president and Nazi collaborator, Philippe Pétain. Under his leadership were three remarkable divisional commanders: the competent General Ernest Blondlat of the Moroccan Division, stoic and beloved General Ernest Barbot of the 77th, and the bitterly acerbic General Marie Emile Fayolle of the 70th (Fayolle would go on to command over 50 divisions in the Reserve Army Group, and became a Marshal of France after the war). Here we will primarily focus on the exploits of these divisions as they struggled up the slopes of Vimy Ridge during the Second Battle of Artois.

**“FOR HIS PERSONAL HEROISM AND UNFLAGGING LEADERSHIP, ERNEST BARBOT WAS PROMOTED TO THE RANK OF GENERAL AND DECLARED THE SAVIOUR OF ARRAS”**





French and German soldiers engage in a vicious *melée* at the hill of Notre Dame de Lorette, north-west of Arras during the Second Battle of Artois



The battle erupted on 9 May 1915 to the sound of 783 field guns and 293 heavy artillery pieces opening fire on utterly unsuspecting German defenders. Despite a build-up of French troops opposite them and a preparatory artillery bombardment that had preceded the attack by nearly a week, a sudden burst of bad weather had seemed to have derailed the French force's plans, or at any rate made it unclear when, or even if, they were ever going to attack. This surprise, combined with poor German preparation and the skill and tenacity of the attackers, led to the unsuspected success of the first day of the battle.

The primary French assault was aided by poor German preparation. The centre of the German position consisted of a mere pair of shallow defensive lines masking the approach to Vimy. Their primary purpose was not necessarily to defend the ridge, but merely to link together the more serious defensive positions at Neuville in the south and Souchez in the north. The XXXIII CA would rapidly overrun these weak positions on 9 May.

**“WHILE THE CHANGE IN BATTLE PLANS WOULD UNDOUBTEDLY MAKE IT MORE DIFFICULT TO CAPTURE VIMY RIDGE, THE FRENCH DID HAVE SOME ADVANTAGES GOING FOR THEM”**

The first plan for the battle appeared on 24 March 1915. It was submitted to Joseph Joffre, commander in chief of the French army, by Ferdinand Foch, then commander of the Provisional Northern Army Group. Foch's plan envisioned the battle unfolding over a series of stages, each a small, carefully organised operation to capture a particular piece of terrain before the final assault would be sent to storm Vimy Ridge.

First the southern sector would attack, advancing on a line from Carency to Roclincourt and clearing the southern wing of the battlefield from the deadly German positions there, which would flank any premature assault on Vimy. After that battle had finished, a second offensive would be launched to the north to clear the Germans off Notre Dame de Lorette. The German positions there offered a commanding view of ground over which any assault on Vimy would have to cover. They could co-ordinate artillery fire and shoot down upon the advancing French from their flank, dooming any attack on Vimy to failure.

Last, the French, having secured both of their flanks and also advanced closer to the foot of Vimy ridge, would attack up and take the dominant high ground overlooking the Douai plains. The plan was sensible, achievable and well-conceived. Unfortunately, for some in the French high command, undoubtedly including Joffre, it simply was not fast enough. In between late March and early May, Foch's proposed three-step operation had been turned into a single, general offensive, with all phases happening simultaneously. In theory, as long as the entire French front advanced together at

roughly the same pace they would be fine. If any part of the offensive stalled, however, it would expose the other sectors to withering enfilade fire. It was a bold, and needlessly risky plan to try to win a major strategic victory in a single blow; just the sort of victory the politicians and senior commanders of France felt that the nation required.

While the change in battle plans would undoubtedly make it more difficult to capture Vimy Ridge, the French did have some advantages going for them. Tenth Army, who would be commanding the overall attack, was flooded with the best men, guns and munitions the French had available. The vaunted XX CA, the 'Iron Corps' consisting of the 11th 'Iron' and 39th 'Steel' divisions, was moved in to secure XXXIII CA's southern flank.

The XX CA had once been Ferdinand Foch's command. Its role was to cover Alsace-Lorraine in the event of war, and was boldly pushed forward to liberate the lost territories in 1914. The campaign ended in defeat, and nearly disaster. Nevertheless, it remained an elite formation, and was tasked with capturing some of the most complicated defensive positions in the region: Neuville and 'the Labyrinth', a rat's warren of trenches and barbed wire covering the southern approach to Neuville.

The French also had substantial artillery for the battle. Whereas the French army had marched to war with only 303 heavy guns in total, in 1914 Tenth Army would have access to 293 for its attack on Vimy. Some of these guns were modern 155mm court tir rapide (short, rapid fire) Rimailho guns produced in the years immediately before the war; these were the



*French soldiers  
prepare for the  
advance towards Vimy  
Ridge. They would  
advance more than  
four kilometres in just  
90 minutes*

**"THE BATTLE ERUPTED ON 9 MAY 1915 TO THE  
SOUND OF 783 FIELD GUNS AND 293 HEAVY  
ARTILLERY PIECES OPENING FIRE ON UTTERLY  
UNSUSPECTING GERMAN DEFENDERS"**



best heavy artillery the French army had. Most of the artillery remained either field guns, like the famous French 75, or ancient De Bange guns built in the 1870s and 1880s that had sat unused in fortifications for nearly 40 years. They were solid, rugged guns but were built before hydraulic recoil systems had been invented and consequently had a lamentably slow rate of fire; generally no more than one aimed shot per minute. They would struggle to keep up with the pace of modern warfare.

The French also had an ace up their sleeve: a new doctrine for the attack. Entitled 'But et conditions d'une attaque offensive d'ensemble' (Goal and conditions for a general offensive), this new doctrine, released on 16 April 1915, would set forth the groundwork for French attacks for the rest of the war. The doctrine established and codified a range of procedures usually attributed to coming about much later in the war (very often attributed to the Germans).

The new approach separated the infantry into assault waves and secondary 'trench clearers'. The assault waves would advance as far and fast as possible, bypassing enemy strongpoints and leaving them to be taken care of by subsequent waves (the basis for 'infiltration tactics', the intellectual bedrock for blitzkrieg).

Secondary waves would be specially armed with grenades, revolvers and trench knives and trained for close-quarters fighting. Their job would be to mop up the strongholds bypassed by the assault wave. The new doctrine also codified the use of the rolling barrage, a slowly advancing wall of fire and steel that would mask the advance of the infantry, and keep the defenders' heads down until the last minute when assault forces would be able to overwhelm them before they could put up any organised resistance. Both tactics, in varying forms, would become critical parts of every major successful attack, French, British or German, for much of the war.

## MANIFEST DISARRAY

At 4.30am on 9 May, the assault troops of Tenth Army moved into their forward positions. At 6am, the final artillery preparation began. After an hour of careful, methodical registration and range-finding, the artillery opened up with full force at 7am, firing until 10am at which point the infantry surged over the top towards the German line. The advance was so rapid that a mere ten minutes into the attack, artillery batteries tasked with supporting the main assault of the 77th and Moroccan divisions were told to displace forward as soon as possible, lest the infantry outrun the range of their guns.

Under Blondlat's orders, the men of the Moroccan division advanced without their packs: only water, ammunition and perhaps a small bit of food. Speed and alacrity was the call of the day. The first two waves, later referred to as 'shock troops' in reports, carried out the new doctrine flawlessly, filtering past strongpoints and surging up the slopes of Vimy Ridge by 11.30am: they had advanced over four kilometres in 90 minutes.

By noon, secondary waves began reaching the men at the front desperately trying to push the Germans off Vimy Ridge, including French heavy machine guns. Observers remarked that it was like watching men manoeuvre over open terrain. The last orders Blondlat gave before the attack

# THE SECOND BATTLE OF ARTOIS 1915

## 06 COTE 119

Hill 119, otherwise known as 'the pimple'. This spot marks the furthest extent of the Moroccan division's advance on 16 June.

## 07 SOUCHEZ CEMETERY

Cemeteries were easily transformed into dangerous field fortifications. This grisly defensive position stalled the advance of the 77th Division on 9 May 1915.

## 05 NOTRE DAME DE LORETTE

Notre Dame de Lorette was a thin spur that struck out parallel to the advance of the 77th and Moroccan divisions. It remained in German hands for weeks after 9 May, and caused substantial difficulties for French units in the valley below.



**01 COTE 140**

This is Vimy Ridge - notice its long, thin structure that helped make it a dominating observation post.

**04 LA FOLIE**

A concentration of German artillery was based in this farm. It could fire across most of the front and hit units advancing on Vimy or Souchez in enfilade.

**02 THE 'LABYRINTH'**

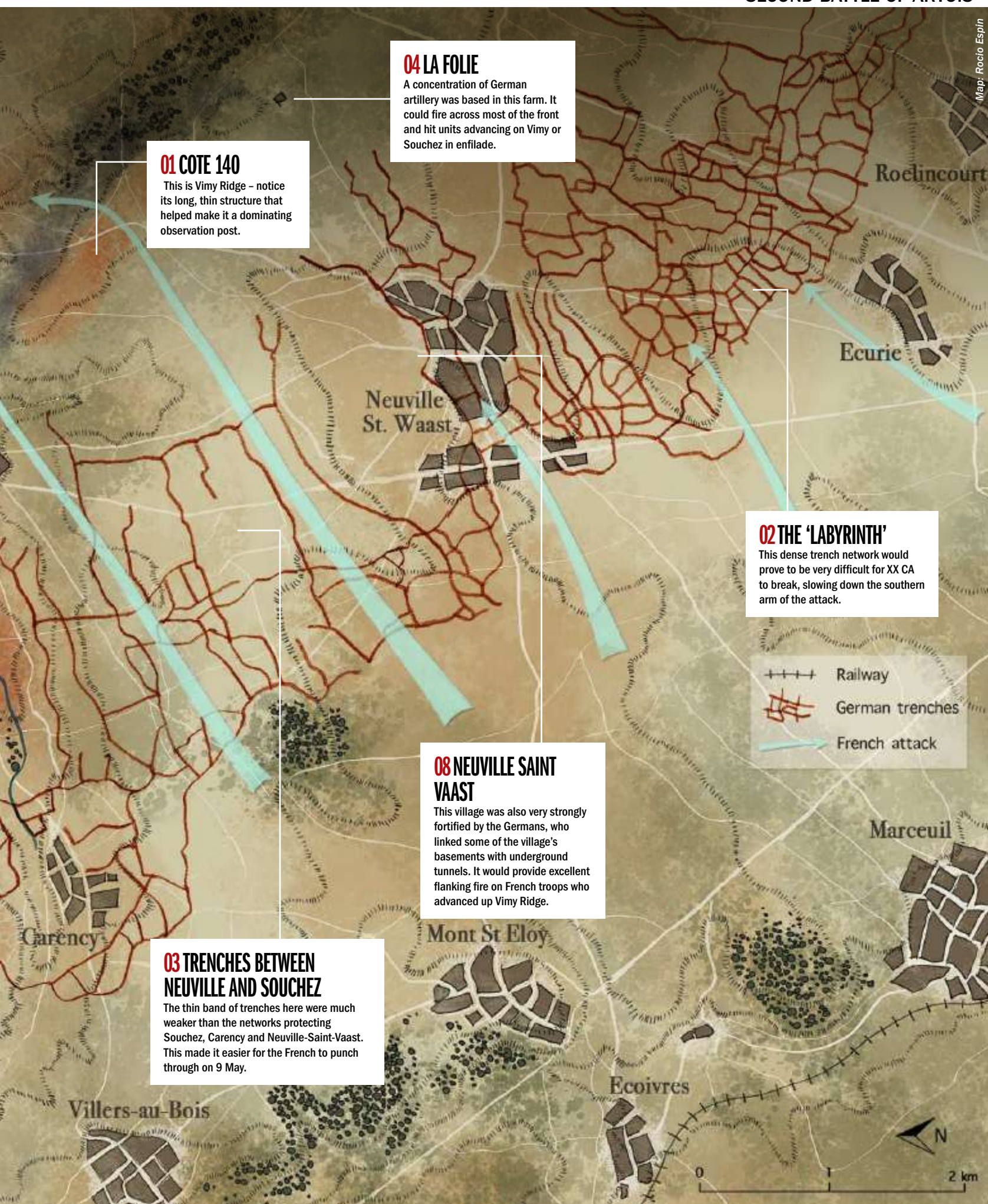
This dense trench network would prove to be very difficult for XX CA to break, slowing down the southern arm of the attack.

**08 NEUVILLE SAINT VAAST**

This village was also very strongly fortified by the Germans, who linked some of the village's basements with underground tunnels. It would provide excellent flanking fire on French troops who advanced up Vimy Ridge.

**03 TRENCHES BETWEEN NEUVILLE AND SOUCHEZ**

The thin band of trenches here were much weaker than the networks protecting Souchez, Carency and Neuville-Saint-Vaast. This made it easier for the French to punch through on 9 May.





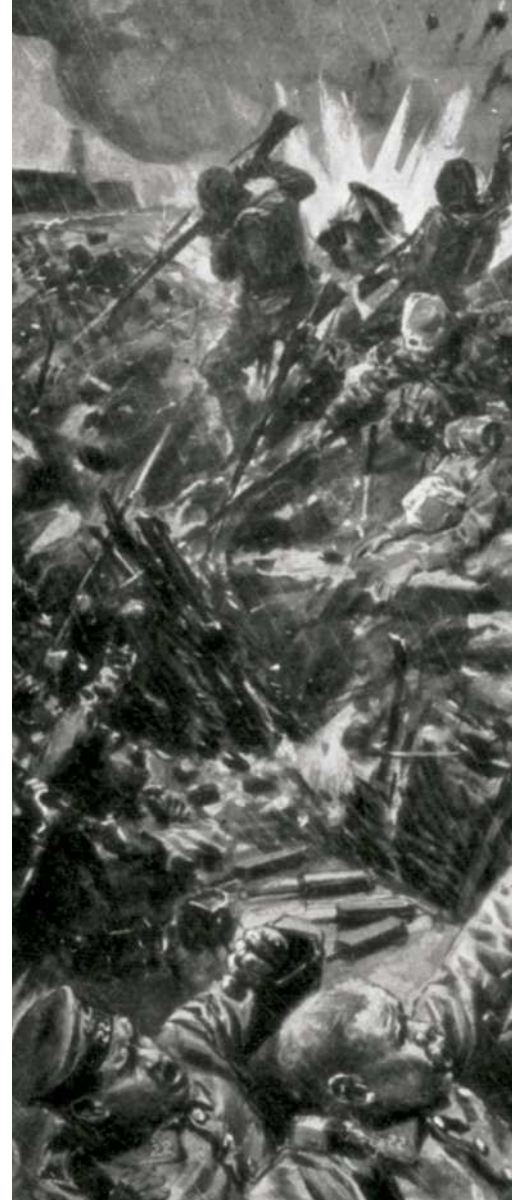
1915



*German prisoners of war captured during the battle*



*French forces entering the town of Clarency observe the damage left behind by the Germans*



was sentimental, "You know I love you like my own children. If you want to show that you love me too, fight well and kill as many boches as you can!" Some men of the Moroccan Division advanced so far, so quickly, they passed Vimy Ridge altogether, winding up in Givenchy-en-Gohelle behind Vimy's northern shoulder and wound up suffering friendly fire from their own 75s. One soldier from the Moroccan division later recalled glancing back from Vimy Ridge over the ground they had covered, saying that, "the enemy camp [was in] manifest disarray; we met some local resistance here and there, but nothing more organised than that was encountered."

Blondlat ordered the reserves forward at 10.30am. By 1.30pm, General Victor d'Urbal, Tenth Army commander had learned of Moroccan division's success and ordered parts of the 18th division forward to reinforce them. They would not arrive at the front line until 5.15pm, by which time they were exhausted, having marched for eight kilometres and suffering grievous casualties to German counter-bombardments. This weakening of the push as it got to Vimy Ridge would prove fatal. The attack just did not have the impetus to push the Germans off the ridge. The French troops began to dig in on Vimy, desperately trying to hold on to their foothold.

The 77th Division performed similarly. By 11.30am, its forward-most units were mixed in among the Moroccan Division in Givenchy

and on Vimy. Part of the division had wheeled north to tackle Souchez and had been caught in fierce fighting in the heavily defended cemetery. Difficulties in observation and liaison, coupled with the loss of Barbot and most of his staff, meant that the 77th was not able to push forward reserves as quickly as the Moroccans had. The attack stalled, and the 77th ultimately had to pull back out of Souchez, to a line running parallel to the Neuville-Souchez road.

Unfortunately, no other sector had anything like the success enjoyed by the 77th and Moroccan divisions that day. To the south the XX CA, despite all their professionalism and preparation, were stopped after a short advance into Neville and the Labyrinth, a dense network of trenches and barbed wire that masked the approach to the city. They would spend the next month fighting house to house in brutal, close quarters combat before the small town was finally back in French hands. The Germans had fortified the squat, stone houses and connected many of their basements with an underground network of interlinking tunnels. It was a formidable defensive position.

To the north progress was equally slow. The 70th division under Fayolle made steady, but slow progress in their sector, which was littered with strongly fortified villages. On Notre Dame de Lorette, the XXI CA advanced only 200 metres. Under different circumstances this would not have mattered. In the specific

context of Second Artois, however, their slow advance was catastrophic. As a result, the 77th and Moroccan divisions faced German fire from 360 degrees. They were cut off from meaningful help; any reinforcements had to pass through withering fire to get to them, and they could hardly move without being cut down. They stayed in these positions for three days, making a second attempt to push the Germans off Vimy Ridge on 11 May, to no avail. After a mere 72 hours, the 77th division was exhausted, the Moroccans virtually annihilated.

Under cover of night on the 11/12 May, the Moroccan division was relieved and sent to the rear to rest and recuperate. They would not see any more action for another six weeks. To commemorate their effort and sacrifice, there now rests a small, poorly maintained monument atop Vimy Ridge, marking the spot of their furthest advance.

## FURTHER ATTEMPTS

After the tantalising near-success of 9 May, the French would make two further attempts to capture Vimy. On 16 June, another 9 May-style attack was launched. This time the XXXIII CA was in more of a support role, having allowed the fresh IX CA to take the central position. While sound in theory, the attack was impractical. The line had become distorted and twisted after a month of hard fighting, and the IX CA suffered





## “IF THERE WERE ANYTHING TRULY NOTABLE ABOUT THE FIGHTING IN MID-JUNE 1915 BEFORE VIMY, IT WAS THE FIRST EVER DEPLOYMENT OF ASPHYXIATING GAS VIA ARTILLERY SHELL”

from mediocre leadership and morale. Despite Pétain expressly voicing his concerns that his corps might again find itself advancing too far too fast and becoming isolated, the IX CA failed to advance very far and did not cover his flank. The Moroccan division again had the best day, advancing 1,000 metres and taking hill 119 (which the Canadians rechristened ‘the pimple’). Once more they were isolated and suffered withering enfilade fire. Again they were required to pull back after suffering heavy casualties.

If there were anything truly notable about the fighting in mid-June 1915 before Vimy, it was the first ever deployment of asphyxiating gas via artillery shell.

After the German deployment of clouds of chlorine gas on 22 April 1915, the Entente powers rapidly moved forward with their own poison gas programmes. The British would launch an analogous chlorine attack on 25 September. The French, however, did not have enough spare chlorine to do the same. The nation had been short of chemicals before the war, and relied on Germany for imports of key materials. During the war they had to turn to

the Americans, which limited their supply of industrial chemicals, and increased their price. Since chlorine was critical for the manufacture of high explosives, the French instead created a totally unique poison gas of carbon disulphide and phosphorus which, when detonated, would combine to create a gas that was both asphyxiating and incendiary.

The French had 10,000 of these new gas shells to support the attacks on 16 June. Shells fired into Souchez had little effect; the town was already rubble by this point and there was little to ignite. Shells fired deeper into the German rear were more successful. By the afternoon, German-held Angres was in flames.

The most stunning success, however, was on the XX CA front. They fired their gas shells into La Folie, a farm tucked just behind the southern shoulder of Vimy Ridge where German batteries had been able to fire on French positions from enfilade, granting them near impunity. XX CA flooded the area with poison gas shells and silenced the German artillery for 90 minutes. It was an absolute revelation and set the stage for how poison gas would be used for the rest of the

*Above: Soldiers of the XX CA wearing gas masks propel poison gas shells towards the German forces*

war: artillery and enemy neutralisation. It might be tempting to see the Second Battle of Artois as merely a failed attempt to take a strategic piece of high-ground. In reality, however, the battle was important in a few distinct ways. Its foundational doctrine and conception would go on to change how war was fought on the Western Front. The use of primitive infiltration tactics, the diversification of infantry soldiers, and the use of sophisticated artillery techniques like the rolling barrage were all critical steps forward for fighting in trench warfare. That they all came so early in the war should be striking. The same can be said of the early French use of poison gas in a forward-looking neutralisation role, rather than using it as a ‘wonder weapon’ by floating clouds of gas towards enemy infantry.

The French battles for Vimy Ridge, both Second and Third Artois, also moved the line forward substantially. The Canadian conquest of Vimy Ridge in April 1917 would simply not have been possible if their forces had been starting out from the same positions that the 77th and Moroccan divisions had two years earlier. The Canadian start line ultimately ended up being three kilometres forward from where it had been on 9 May 1915. Undoubtedly, The French battles set the stage for later successes, both at Vimy and elsewhere.





# BATTLE OF LOOS

25 SEPTEMBER – 15 OCTOBER 1915

The largest British offensive of the Great War so far brought with it a number of terrible records: the bloodening of the volunteers of 1914, Britain's first use of poison gas, and a horrific casualty rate to rival the Somme

**I**n Autumn 1915 Britain was ill-prepared for large-scale offensive operations, but its allies had other ideas.

Russia – the clock ticking toward revolution – was reeling from defeats in Polish Galicia and a renewed assault in the west was deemed vital to keep the Great Bear fighting. Similarly, French morale was low after the dramatic German advances of 1914, and the open wound of public opinion demanded the restoration of territory seized by the foe.

The senior commander on the Western Front, French General Joseph Joffre, ordered a three-pronged offensive, with British and French forces attacking in the Third Battle of Artois (25 September to 4 November 1915) and further south another French attack in the Second Battle of Champagne (25 September to 6 November 1915). Joffre's aim was to punch through the German lines and end the attritional trench warfare.

Paris also doubted the British will to fight, and watching London's misadventures in the Middle

East with a wary eye, they sought to commit the British Expeditionary Force to Europe. The northernmost sector of the Third Artois was to be fought by the British Army and British Indian Army alone in the Battle of Loos.

The proposed battlefield was a killing field of mining villages and flat fields, overlooked by the grasping black fingers of colliery towers and slag heaps held by the Germans. Behind these ramparts, the enemy had laid down a second defensive line making Loos-en-Gohelle area one of the most heavily fortified stretches of the front.

Field Marshal Sir John French (British Commander in Chief) protested the plan – not just about the unfavourable terrain, but the shortage of shells too – but was overruled by the War Office. French, by then ill, tired and increasingly disengaged, delegated full responsibility for planning the offensive to General Sir Douglas Haig, commander of the First Army.

Although outnumbering the defending Germans two to one, victory always favours the defender.

With artillery greatly reduced by the shell shortage and that overwhelming manpower consisting in part of untested New Army battalions (made up of men who volunteered following the outbreak of war), the First Army was a force in flux.

Haig, initially as pessimistic as his superior, grew increasingly enthused and envisaged a decisive offensive, which he believed would break through the German lines and win the war. In lieu of overwhelming artillery, Haig was convinced that chlorine gas was the answer – released from canisters, this would drift out across the battlefield with the wind.

Haig's confidence was unshakable. Initially he planned to use gas across the whole 32-kilometre (20-mile) front, until it was pointed out the jagged nature of the British lines meant that the wind would have to be blowing in different directions at the same time. This vulnerability to the weather was fundamentally incompatible with the fact that the offensive *had* to take place on 25 September or the French would be advancing alone.





**BELOW** Though the accuracy is disputed, Robert Graves delivered an evocative account of the battle in his memoir *Goodbye to All That* (1929)



**ABOVE** British soldiers attack wearing an early form of hooded gas mask called a PH helmet

**LEFT** The overall architect of the battle, General Sir Douglas Haig would repeat his mistakes at the Somme

**FAR LEFT** A Scottish battalion takes a German trench. The 15th (Scottish) Division endured the highest casualty rate of the offensive, with 6,896 killed or wounded

Haig also ignored German readiness (machine gun teams had access to oxygen masks designed for miners, while infantry had pads they could soak in chemicals and wear across their mouths and noses), and the insufficient quantity of gas available. In order to overcome the 30 minutes of oxygen available to the German machine gunners, the 5,243 cylinders of chlorine gas were diluted with smoke by releasing a five-minute burst of one and then five minutes of the other.

For his part Sir John French was slow to grasp scale of Haig's plans. The relationship between the two had grown acrimonious and with Haig protected by influential patrons in London, the Commander-in-Chief's ability to shape the outcome was limited. He opted to take full control of the First Army's two reserve divisions, and hold them so far back that Haig would surely be forced to curtail the scale of the attack. Haig called French's bluff and went ahead with his plans, assuming that French would be forced to change his mind.

On 25 September, with the weather less than favourable but no opportunity to postpone, six British divisions of 75,000 men advanced through the cloud of gas and smoke following a three-day artillery bombardment. War poet Robert Graves, a lieutenant in 3rd Battalion, Royal Welch Fusiliers, recalled the scene in his memoir *Goodbye to All That* (1929): "At last we saw the gas going over in two or three places: it looked like small clouds rolling along close to the ground. The white clouds hadn't travelled far before they seemed to stop and melt away. I found out later that the wind that should have taken it across no-man's-land hadn't put in an appearance and the gas had spread back into our trenches."

In the south the British broke through Loos itself and took the strategically vital Hill 70, and in the north some attackers were able to punch

through the first line of German defences before the advance faltered and their momentum dissipated.

The German second line followed a cluster of mining villages fortified with barbed wire and machine gun nests, and with little artillery support to clear the wire or force the defenders below their parapets, the British found themselves hopelessly exposed. The Germans concentrated their artillery on the support trenches, creating bottlenecks of men – some reinforcements grew so frustrated with this faltering progress that they scaled the trenches and advanced across the open into the fatal embrace of German machine guns.

Chaos began to take hold. Haig's orders at battalion and division level were so vague as to be meaningless. Told simply to advance as far as they could, as soon as their officers fell, many platoons drifted off course or advanced without support, easily picked off by the defenders.

A culture of leading from the front, plus distinctive uniforms for commanding officers made officers especially vulnerable to sniper fire and on the first day of the offensive nine battalion commanders were killed and 12 wounded, part of a gruesome average of 1,058 dead per division. At this level, Loos was far more costly than even the Somme.

Robert Graves recalled wounded men limping back to the lines with a grim assessment of what happened: "Bloody balls-up."

At the dawn of the second day, French committed the reserves – the 21st and 24th Divisions. Marched from the rear, they entered the field exhausted and were thrown straight into an impossible battle where communication and command had long since broken down. Laughably, one set of instructions issued to the reserve was to proceed to Hill 70 and if the British still held





it, support them, and if they had lost it, push the Germans off it.

With momentum lost, all that was left was a series of ugly piecemeal actions try desperately to break the German lines and make good on the first day's gains. Hill 70 was retaken and in the woods of Bois, Hugo John Kipling, a second lieutenant with 2nd Battalion, Irish Guards and son of poet Rudyard Kipling, was missing and presumed dead in the fierce fighting.

Aghast at the chaotic advance of the reserves, Graves wrote: "Pushed blindly into the gap made by the advance [...] on the previous afternoon, they did not know where they were or what they were supposed to be doing. Their ration supply broke down, so they flocked back, not in panic, but stupidly, like a crowd returning from a cup final, with shrapnel bursting above them."

By the end of the second day the German second line was reinforced and all realistic chance of breakthrough was void. The Battle of Loos would continue for another three weeks, now nothing more than a series of desperate, depressing ill-prepared skirmishes over what the Germans came to call the Leichenfeld der Loos – the Field of Corpses of Loos.

Haig wasted no time in throwing French under the omnibus, blaming his superior for his delay in ordering the reserves forward and his insistence in placing them too far to the rear. Writing on 29 September to Lord Kitchener, Secretary of State for War, the general crowed: "No Reserve was placed under me. My attack, as has been reported, was a complete success. The enemy had no troops in his second line, which some of my plucky fellows reached and entered without opposition. [...] We were in a position to make this the turning point in the war [...] but naturally I feel very annoyed at the lost opportunity."

Lt General Henry Rawlinson, commander of the IV Corps, offered a bleaker account in his letter to the King's private secretary, dated 28 September: "From what I can ascertain, some of the divisions did actually reach the enemy's trenches, for their bodies can now be seen on the barbed wire."

French was recalled to London and dismissed, with Haig taking his place as Commander-in-Chief. At the close of 15 October, the British Expeditionary Force had suffered an estimated 59,000 dead and wounded. Arguably a greater tragedy is how little was really learned and the cold shadow of Loos would be felt in the summer of 1916.

Logistically, small changes were made; commanding officers were forbidden from leading from the front; steel helmets, lewis guns and grenades were introduced; and better artillery control and better control of movement behind the lines were enforced. Gas, when used again, would be delivered by shell and not released from the British lines from cylinders.

Tactically, it was a different story. With Haig convinced his plan was otherwise successful, there was little to shake his faith in one decisive action that would end the war. The Somme offensive of July 1916 was a direct consequence.

# THE BATTLE OF LOOS

## 02 15TH (SCOTTISH) DIVISION

The gas hangs back in the British lines, delaying the advance of the 15th (Scottish) Division and leaving them dangerously exposed for the final mad dash to the German lines. Despite coming under sustained machine gun and artillery fire, the Scots take the German lines and advance into Loos. Without clear orders and with many officers now dead, they drift toward the high ground of Hill 70. With 6,896 dead and wounded across the battle, the 15th (Scottish) Division suffer the highest casualty rate of the Battle of Loos.

## 01 HOHENZOLLERN REDOUBT

One of the most infamous German fortifications of the Great War, the Hohenzollern Redoubt is on a slight slope offering commanding views over no man's land and sitting at the heart of a lattice of trenches and machine gun nests amid the old mine workings. Partly captured by the 9th (Scottish) Division, it quickly returns to German hands. A desperate final push to capture Hohenzollern in the closing days of the battle costs a further 3,643 British casualties.

## 03 47TH (2ND LONDON) DIVISION

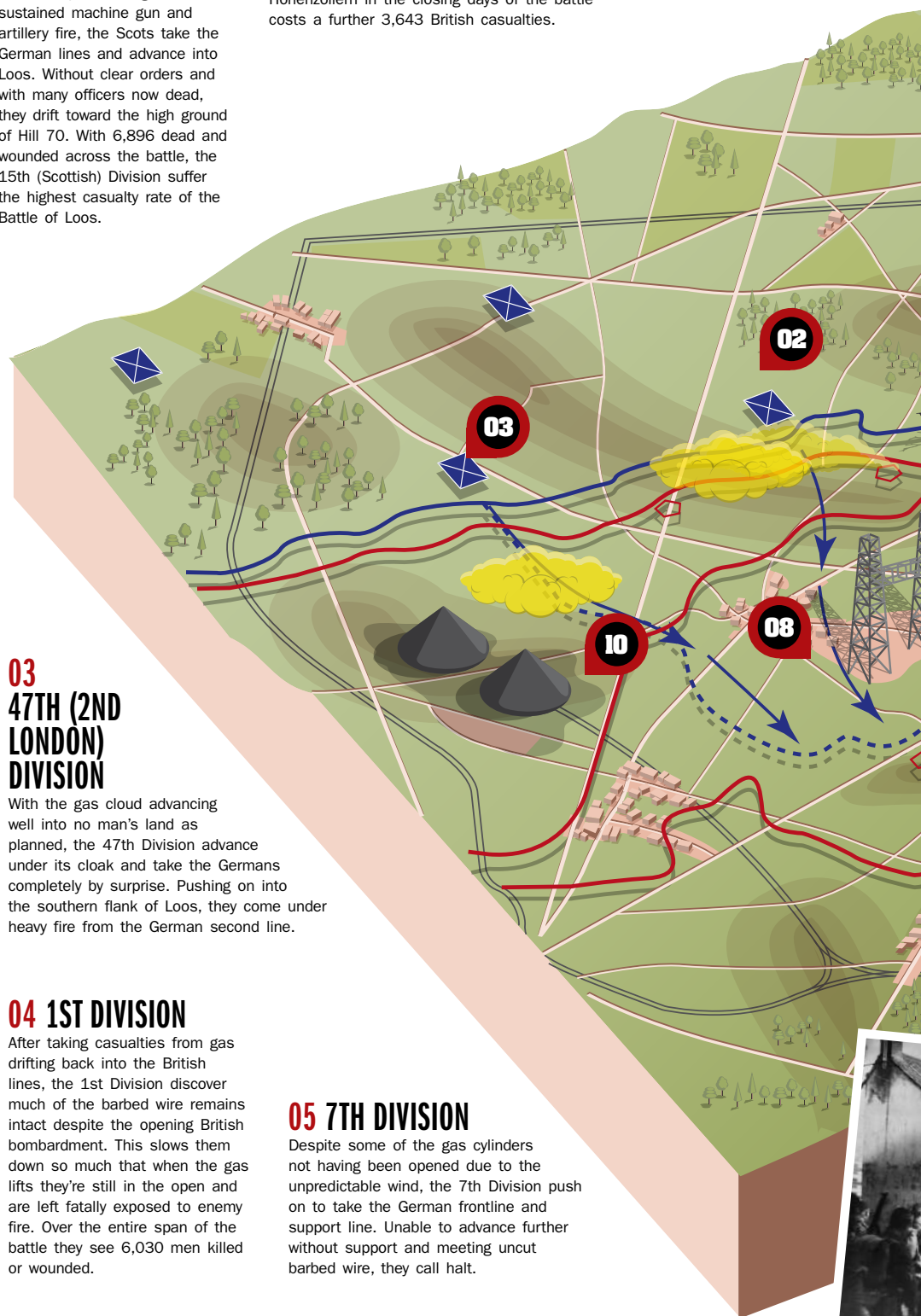
With the gas cloud advancing well into no man's land as planned, the 47th Division advance under its cloak and take the Germans completely by surprise. Pushing on into the southern flank of Loos, they come under heavy fire from the German second line.

## 04 1ST DIVISION

After taking casualties from gas drifting back into the British lines, the 1st Division discover much of the barbed wire remains intact despite the opening British bombardment. This slows them down so much that when the gas lifts they're still in the open and are left fatally exposed to enemy fire. Over the entire span of the battle they see 6,030 men killed or wounded.

## 05 7TH DIVISION

Despite some of the gas cylinders not having been opened due to the unpredictable wind, the 7th Division push on to take the German frontline and support line. Unable to advance further without support and meeting uncut barbed wire, they call halt.





## 11 LONE TREE

Lone Tree is marked on every British trench map of the battlefield and greets the men of the 1st Division as they cross back and forth from no man's land. After the war Lone Tree is cut down and chunks are taken as souvenirs.



## 10 DOUBLE CRASSIER

The 30m (97ft)-high double slagheap of the Double Crassier is another looming feature visible from the British lines. Captured by the 47th (2nd London) Division on the first day of the battle, it remains in their hands despite fierce counterattack.

## 09 HILL 70

The highest point on the battlefield, Hill 70 is subject to intense fighting over the course of the Battle of Loos. Within spitting distance of the second German lines, as well as woods and villages that easily changed hands, men on the slopes of Hill 70 are exposed to enemy fire on two or more sides. On 15-25 August 1917, the Canadian Corps finally seize the coveted high ground in a diversionary action during the Battle of Passchendaele.

## 08 TOWER BRIDGE

The iconic twin pithead lifts of Loos-en-Gohelle are nicknamed 'Tower Bridge' by the British and loom over the landscape. Seen in many photographs and illustrations of the battle, they are used by German artillery spotters and once the village changes hands, the Brits return the favour. Tower Bridge is destroyed by German shellfire in 1918.

## 06 9TH (SCOTTISH) DIVISION

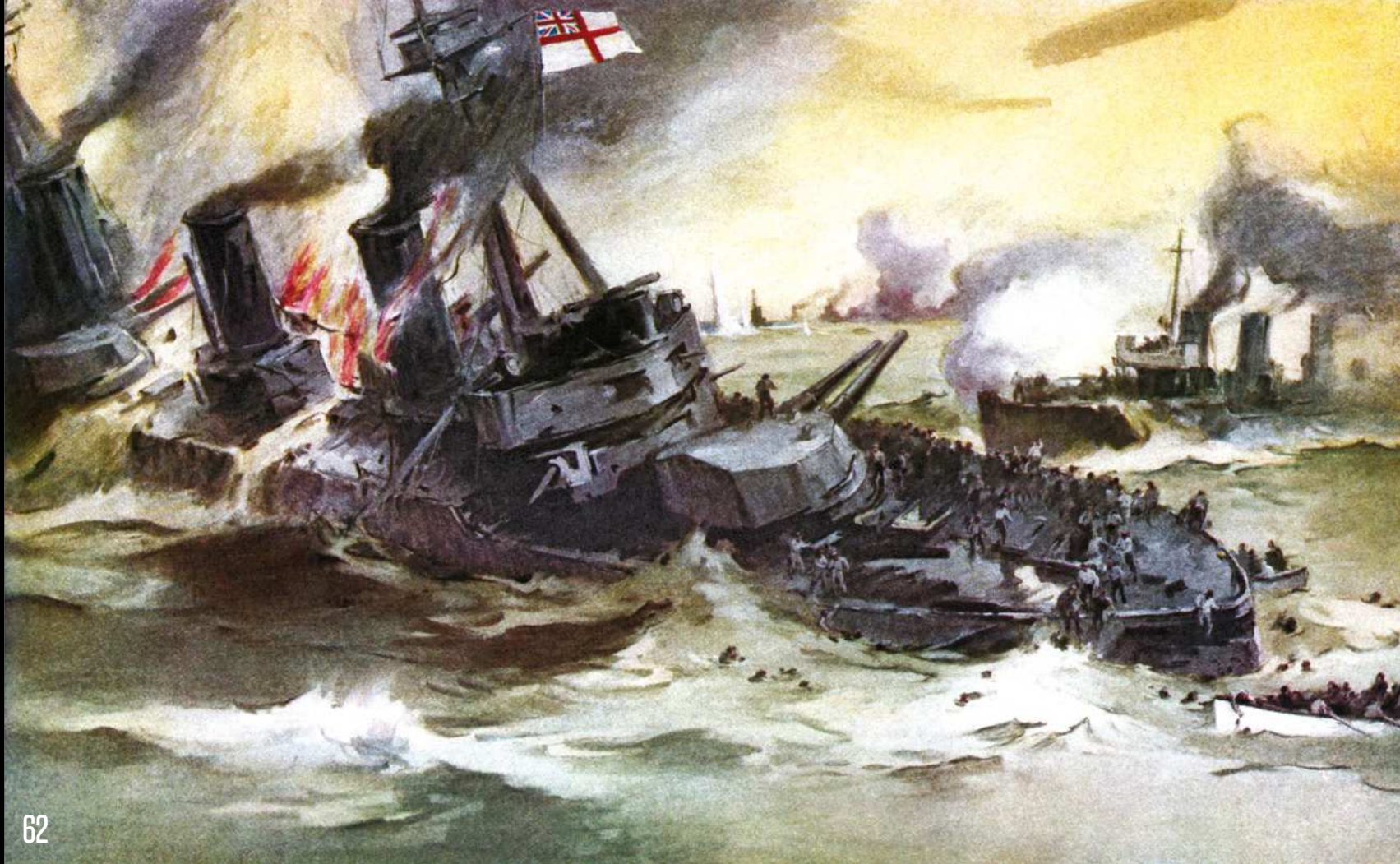
Charged with taking the formidable Hohenzollern Redoubt and the pit buildings of Fosse 8, the 9th (Scottish) Division take casualties as they clear the gas and smoke, and storm the German strongpoint. Ordered further forward, the gas drifts after them and settles in the trenches, blocking retreat and forcing them into open ground. Pinned down by German defenders on multiple sides, they suffer grievously. In total the 9th (Scottish) Division take 6,058 casualties over the entire offensive, second to their countrymen in the 15th (Scottish) Division.

## 07 2ND DIVISION

The 2nd Division attack along the banks of La Bassée canal, taking heavy casualties with few gains, the tragedy deepening as the gas drifts back into the British lines. Coming under heavy fire, the attack is called off and the 2nd Division return to their original lines having made no gains.









# 1916

## 64 THE BATTLE OF VERDUN

Lasting ten months, with 600,000 dead, this monstrous battle produced a loss that is etched into our collective psyche

## 82 THE BATTLE OF JUTLAND

After years of building up battleships to dominate the oceans, the British and German navies finally came to blows in the North Sea

## 84 THE BRUSILOV OFFENSIVE

Perhaps the most successful Allied offensive of World War I, a Russian assault on the Eastern Front decimated Austro-Hungarian forces

## 88 THE BATTLE OF THE SOMME

As the body count began to escalate on the Western Front, British men were recruited straight from the factories to the frontline





# VERDUN

21 FEBRUARY - 18 DECEMBER 1916

Lasting ten months, with 600,000 dead, this monstrous battle produced a loss that is etched into our collective psyche. To understand why and how it happened at all, we first have to look back at its origins





**F**rom 21 February to 18 December 1916, French and German forces took part in what would wind up being the longest land battle ever. Despite this dubious distinction,

Verdun holds a strange place in history. It was not Stalingrad. Verdun did not bleed the Germans white any more than it did the French. It was not a major turning point, and if the French can claim to have won, it was a moral victory as much as anything; the losses suffered by both sides were almost identical.

If Verdun was not the glorious national victory that Stalingrad was, neither was it the staggering disaster that the Somme is – some might say unfairly – remembered as in Britain. In terms of sheer scale, the Somme was roughly double the size of Verdun. The battlefield was longer and the butcher's bill twice as large, despite it lasting only half as long as Verdun. The Somme carries with it the drama of 1 July 1916 and the loss of over 56,000 British soldiers, still the worst day in British military history. By comparison, the French lost 1,560 soldiers on the same battlefield that day, despite contributing roughly half as many troops as the British.

If Verdun does not suffer from quite the same staggering losses as the Somme does for the British, neither does it share as many high-water marks. At the latter, the French broke through twice; along the Flaucourt Plateau in July and again at Bouchavesnes in September. Armoured warfare was born on the Somme, when the British first unveiled their tanks and ordered them to lumber, ungainly, across No Man's Land at Flers-Courcelette on 15 September 1916. Such drama was in short supply along the Verdun front. At most, one could point to the recapture of Douaumont and Vaux, but as we shall see, these accomplishments were hardly equal to the political attention they received.

Despite its lower-key scale, scope and significance, however, the Battle of Verdun remains as one of the centre-pieces of the World War I. In the first of this two-part series, we will explain why.

## THE LANDSCAPE OF WAR

At its most elementary level, strategy is about dealing with fixed geographic obstacles. Although it is often overlooked, geography has an enormous impact on the conduct and planning of warfare. The strategies of island and maritime nations differ from those of landlocked or continental nations. Trade routes that have scarcely changed for centuries, even today continue to map out the economic sinews of our world. The transit routes of the modern day's Caribbean drug traffickers are the same ones used by Caribbean pirates over two centuries ago. The very same beaches, coves and inlets used to shield the unscrupulous pilfering of Spanish gold hundreds of years ago, today still offer security to profitable smuggling operations.

As it is with these shady maritime routes, so it was with the Verdun region. The first forts to occupy this area were built nearly 2,000 years before the Germans launched their attack on 21 February 1916. The Romans had selected the spot as a critical defensive point against Germanic incursions from the east. Over a millennium later in the late 1600s, Sébastien Le Prestre de Vauban, the great Burgundian expert on all things siege warfare, built a grand star-fort at the site to, once again, defend 'France' from 'the Germans'. Remnants of this fort still remained in 1916 and were used as underground storage for men and materiel.

The 'modern' Verdun fort was born out of the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1871). With the loss of Alsace and Lorraine after this humiliating conflict, France also lost important natural defensive barriers. Faced with the likelihood of future conflicts with the newly created Germany, France had no choice but to build new defensive positions out of stone and mortar. The fortified region of Verdun was part of this new fortified perimeter. On the eve of the battle, however, the region (région fortifiée de Verdun, RFV) was hopelessly unprepared for the conflagration the Germans were about to unleash. The RFV's poor state of readiness was partly a response to modern firepower and partly a result of specific decisions made by French high command.

## FRENCH FORCES FAIL TO PREPARE

For nearly four centuries star forts had provided a formidable defence against invading forces, but this efficacy came to an abrupt end in 1914, with the swift capture of Liège and Namur by German forces. Modern, formidable fortresses were simply crushed by the weight of fire unleashed by Krupp and Skoda's howitzers and heavy mortars. Fortresses provided convenient targets for heavy artillery and their defenders were locked in place.

Instead of fixed fortifications, infantry had to rely on field fortifications (trenches) if they were to stand any chance of surviving the onslaught



*The Verdun Cross, created to commemorate the 1916 battle*



of modern firepower. The French took note of this, and once the Western Front had settled down into trench warfare, ordered that trenches be dug in and around their forts; not just Verdun but also Toul, Belfort and elsewhere. In and of itself this would make the fortified regions even stronger. However, French strategy under commander-in-chief General Joseph Joffre included a policy of stripping fortified zones of most of their defensive weaponry.

In 1914-15 the French felt under substantial pressure to do whatever they could to repel the Germans and drive them out of France. This, inevitably, meant that the country would have to go on the offensive. The only problem was that France had a severe deficit of heavy artillery. Its army marched to war with only 308 heavy guns, and barely more than 100 of these were truly modern, rapid-fire howitzers, namely the 155mm court tir rapide Rimailho.

What France did have, however, was roughly 11,000 old artillery pieces from the 1870s and 1880s stored away in depots and fortresses across the country. These were stripped en masse from their resting places and pushed into service as a desperate stop-gap measure so that the army could launch a series of, ultimately, failed offensives. The last and largest of these, Second Champagne, 25 September to 6 November 1915, hit Verdun especially hard. In August 1915 alone the RFV lost 20 batteries of heavy guns; they were sent north in preparation for the big push in the Champagne.

As the battle neared, Joffre began demanding not only heavy artillery from Verdun but also machine guns, mortars, grenades and other crucial weapons. Before Second Champagne came to a close, entire infantry divisions were lifted from the region and shuttled north, leaving it weak and undefended. Few within the military knew or cared about the situation; except for Colonel Émile Driant, an officer serving in the région fortifiée de Verdun. Colonel Driant is one of the most interesting soldiers in service

in World War I. A graduate of the elite military school Saint-Cyr, he went on to become a popular author – writing under the uninventive pseudonym ‘Capitaine Danrit’ – focused on theories of what the next war would be like. As a young man, he married the daughter of none other than General Ernest Boulanger, the ardent nationalist politician and soldier who nearly propelled France into a constitutional crisis.

From 1910, Driant served in the Chamber of Deputies, representing Nancy which had effectively become a border-town with Germany after the loss of Alsace-Lorraine in 1871. This combination of a fascination with ‘future war’ – which he expected to be against Germany – nationalism, and defence meant that Driant was uniquely placed to command troops in the RFV. He fought vigorously against Joffre’s removal of artillery from the sector in 1915, and was not above calling in favours from his colleagues in government to help give his pleas additional weight. On 15 December 1915, he personally wrote to the Minister of War, Joseph Gallieni, and described the pitiful state of the Verdun sector, but there was little the Minister could do.

Unfortunately for the men defending Verdun, Driant’s efforts were in vain. By October 1915 the RFV was already down to just three divisions and 34 territorial battalions. While the three divisions that the RFV lent to the Champagne battle (3rd, 4th and 53rd divisions) would eventually return, they returned shattered. Each had suffered serious casualties and would have taken months to regain their fighting power, even in the best of circumstances. To make matters worse the sector did not have well-developed trench lines. Most of the area was actually just a thinly interlinked series of independent field fortifications tying together the various fortresses. There was no second line of trenches to speak of at a time when it was customary to have one nearly as strong as the first. This was the state of affairs right before the German attack. The first inklings of a German offensive began to appear in



**Above, top:** The Germans attack Fort Vaux in June 1916 while there were French troops inside



**Above:** A fixed artillery position within Fort Vaux. Such positions were anachronistic before the cement had hardened

**Right:** Joseph Joffre, commander-in-chief of the French Army



**“JOFFRE BEGAN DEMANDING NOT ONLY HEAVY ARTILLERY FROM VERDUN BUT ALSO MACHINE GUNS, MORTARS, GRENADES AND OTHER CRUCIAL WEAPONS”**

German troops marching to the front during the campaign





## VERDUN PRELUDE

A view of the landscape soon to be re-shaped into a vision of hell

The Verdun battlefield began as a salient jutting out from the fortified region of Verdun (RFV). French forces were thinly spread out along this defensive region, providing a buffer for the 19 forts which surrounded Verdun itself. Their precarious position was made even weaker by the Meuse river, which ran through the middle of the battlefield. This made it very difficult for the French to enjoy the usual advantages of interior lines when meeting with attacks along different points of the line. The initial German assault would fall on the right bank of the river between Brabant and Ornes.

## BATTLE OF VERDUN

21 February 1916 - 16 December 1916

Fort

Battery

0 1km 5km



January 1916, when a German deserter captured in Denmark told French intelligence of the planned strike at Verdun. Meanwhile, however, Driant's own 56th Battalion of chasseurs à pied (elite light infantry) had begun to notice a build-up of enemy forces and capabilities opposite them. By 16 January, General Frédéric-Georges Herr, commander of the RFV, expressed his nervousness to Joffre, who allowed him to retain control of the 51st division, which had been slated to move elsewhere.

A few days later, Joffre dispatched the commander of the Centre Army Group (Group d'armées de centre, GAC), General Édouard de Castelnau, to the sector to inspect the situation. By the end of January, the RFV had been placed under command of the GAC, which eased its logistics and would allow for the more rapid deployment of reserves if needed. At this time Joffre also began to allow artillery to trickle back into the sector. Roughly ten groups of heavy artillery were moved in late January, including two groups of modern 155CTRs, the best gun the French had.

While this was something, it could never hope to match the 160 batteries of heavy and super-heavy guns sitting opposite them; the Germans had some 1,200 artillery pieces in total and 2.5 million shells. To make matters worse, French defensive positions were still thin, scabbly and unsuited to the task of defending against a heavy German thrust. The RFV still numbered only 11 divisions compared with the 17 German divisions – totalling some 300,000 men, many of them from elite formations like General Ewald von Lochow's III Corps. Despite last-minute, desperate attempts to prepare Verdun for the coming onslaught, they would find themselves woefully unready and overwhelmed.

## THE GERMAN PLAN

In stark contrast to the lack of preparedness among French forces, the German army was primed and ready for a battle that it hoped would swing the war in their favour. The battle was conceived by General Erich von Falkenhayn, commander-in-chief of the Germany army from late 1914 until August 1916. Falkenhayn was a naturally pessimistic, taciturn and private man. When he took over for the nerve-wrecked Helmuth von Moltke the Younger he looked out at a very difficult strategic position. Germany, despite the excellent performance of its armed forces in the opening months of the war, found itself bogged down in a struggle on two fronts against enemies with vastly deeper pools of manpower and capital. Germany had no chance of victory if at least one of the Entente powers could not be knocked out of the war soon.

For many in the German army, Russia soon seemed like the logical power to attack. After all, 1915 had been disastrous for the Russian army. Starting in May 1915 at the Battle of Gorlice-Tarnow, where German heavy artillery outnumbered the Russian 100 to four, the Russians lost a long series of battles in what was termed 'the Great Retreat'. Over the course of the year they lost nearly all of their Eastern European holdings and found themselves fighting

# FORT DOUAUMONT

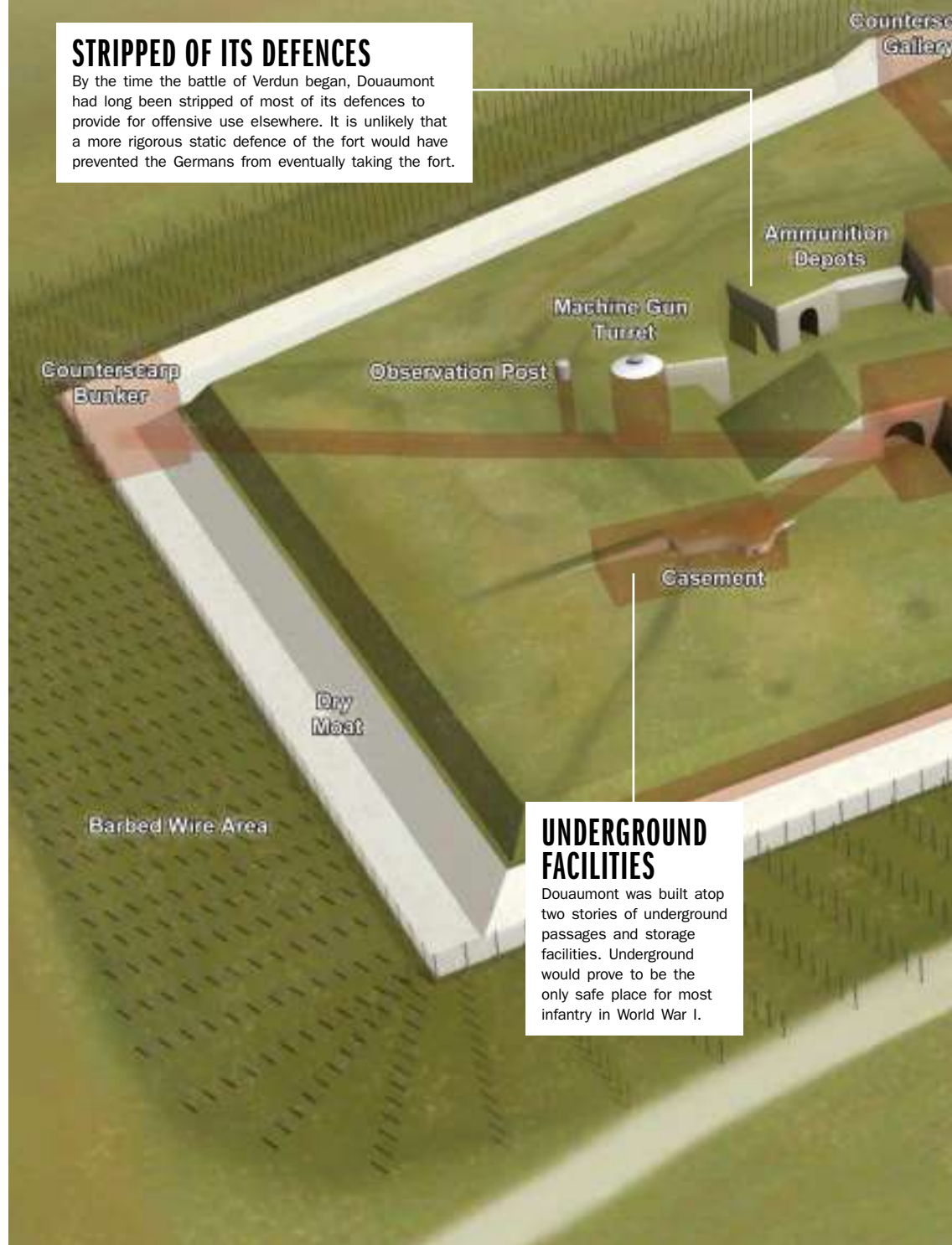
A look inside the ageing, but sturdy, fortified focus of the battle

Built starting in the 1880s Douaumont was part of the defensive structure France constructed in response to their humiliating defeat in the Franco-Prussian War. The fort boasted ample subterranean storage facilities and rotating artillery

turrets to augment its traditional fixed artillery emplacements. Its shape reflected lessons learned from centuries of fortification construction, and allowed for wide, overlapping fields of fire from artillery and fixed machine gun emplacements.

## STRIPPED OF ITS DEFENCES

By the time the battle of Verdun began, Douaumont had long been stripped of most of its defences to provide for offensive use elsewhere. It is unlikely that a more rigorous static defence of the fort would have prevented the Germans from eventually taking the fort.



## UNDERGROUND FACILITIES

Douaumont was built atop two stories of underground passages and storage facilities. Underground would prove to be the only safe place for most infantry in World War I.



## ONE OF MANY

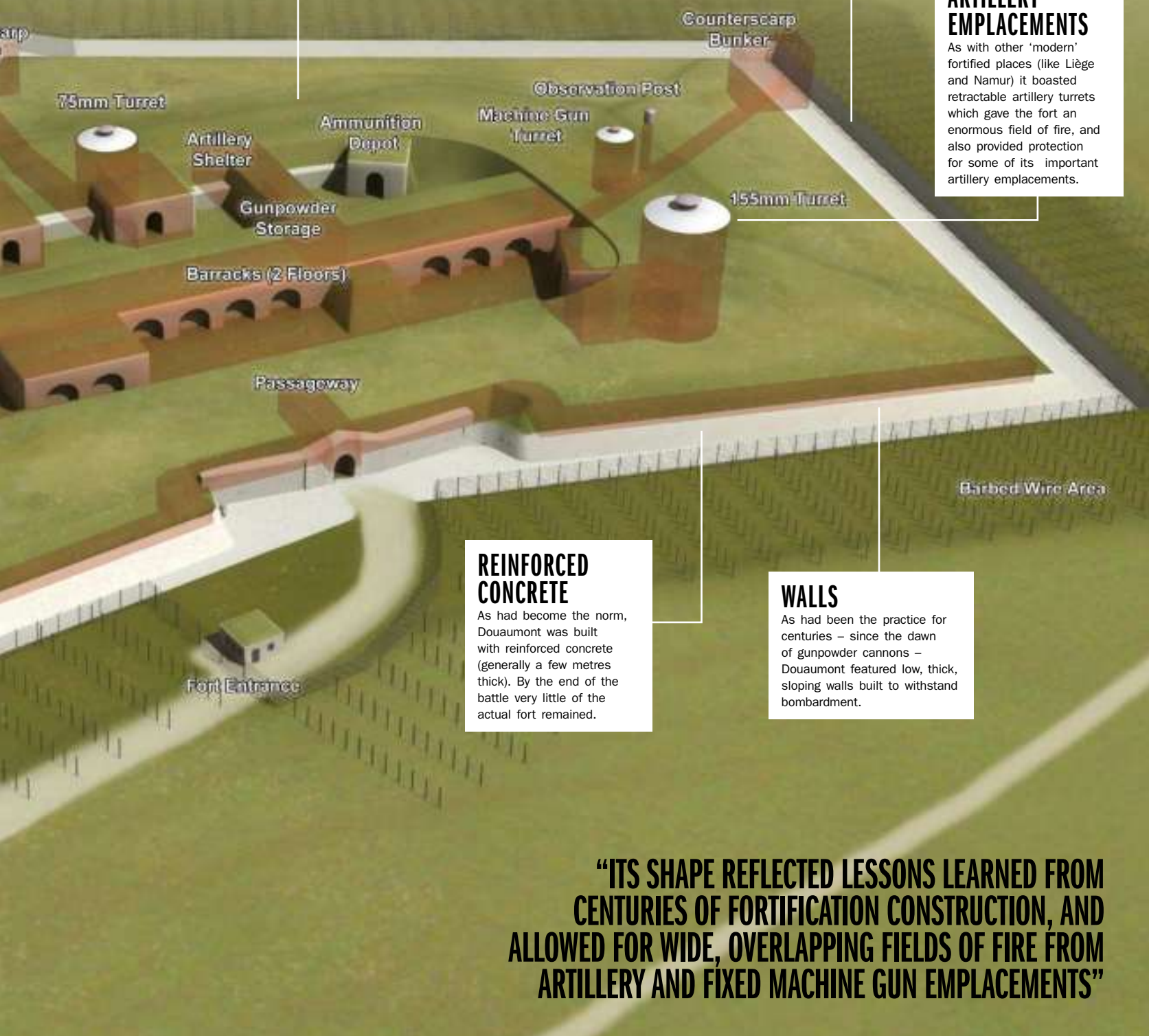
Douaumont was the largest fort in the region, measuring roughly 400 metres across. It was, however, intended to act as part of a wider network of forts, rather than survive exclusively on its own.

## MOAT

Douaumont did boast a small moat, but by the time the battle had started it was of no consequence. The fort had been all but abandoned by the start of the battle.

## ROTATING ARTILLERY EMPLACEMENTS

As with other 'modern' fortified places (like Liège and Namur) it boasted retractable artillery turrets which gave the fort an enormous field of fire, and also provided protection for some of its important artillery emplacements.



## REINFORCED CONCRETE

As had become the norm, Douaumont was built with reinforced concrete (generally a few metres thick). By the end of the battle very little of the actual fort remained.

## WALLS

As had been the practice for centuries – since the dawn of gunpowder cannons – Douaumont featured low, thick, sloping walls built to withstand bombardment.

**“ITS SHAPE REFLECTED LESSONS LEARNED FROM CENTURIES OF FORTIFICATION CONSTRUCTION, AND ALLOWED FOR WIDE, OVERLAPPING FIELDS OF FIRE FROM ARTILLERY AND FIXED MACHINE GUN EMPLACEMENTS”**



German troops on Russian soil, taking staggering casualties. Meanwhile, French and British attacks on the Western Front had failed to threaten German positions in France and Flanders. For many in Germany's high command it seemed prudent to rest on the defensive in the West and to continue to push along the Eastern Front.

Falkenhayn saw it differently. Russia was vast, and could theoretically continue to absorb staggering losses in men, materiel and pure geography without definitely being knocked out of the war. Worse still, however, was the fact that

the further the Germans advanced the longer their logistical lines would have to stretch. This not only would increase the cost of fighting on the Eastern Front – an oft-overlooked consideration in 'total', industrialised war where every resource is precious – but it would lock German forces into a rigid posture.

By late 1915 the German army, despite its substantial advance into Russia – over 200 kilometres – was still in a position to shift reserve units to the Western Front relatively quickly in case of an emergency. The further into Russia the Germans advanced the more difficult this would become.

Such a situation would force the Germans to either maintain more forces in the West than they really needed. The choice was either starve the Eastern Front of men and materiel, or run the risk of France and Britain cracking their lines in the West, leading to a potentially catastrophic and hasty retreat to some new line of defence. Neither situation was ideal.

For Falkenhayn, attacking the West was the most promising of a range of poor strategic options he had available to him. He knew that the series of attacks the French launched in late 1914 and 1915 – three in Artois, two in Champagne

## **“THE CHOICE WAS EITHER STARVE THE EASTERN FRONT OF MEN AND MATERIEL, OR RUN THE RISK OF FRANCE AND BRITAIN CRACKING THEIR LINES”**

and smaller attacks further south – had cost them staggering losses. Between August 1914 and February 1916 France lost roughly 650,000 soldiers, dead. This was nearly as many as Britain would lose in the entire war – subtracting Dominion losses – and substantially more than the number of Britons or Americans who would die in combat from 1939-1945. Such a rate of loss simply could not be sustained forever and Falkenhayn knew it. Even if he did not have precise casualty figures for the French and British up to that time.

Given the difficulty of attacking against increasingly complicated trench networks, it seemed unlikely that Germany could take Paris or drive the British army back into the sea. Even if Germany could, the casualties sustained



*Erich von Falkenhayn, German soldier and Chief of the General staff during WWI*



*“They shall not pass.” The phrase became famous during the defence at Verdun. Here French reserves cross the river*



would make the effort something of a pyrrhic victory, therefore harming Germany's chances of winning a lengthy war against Russia. Falkenhayn needed a way to inflict substantial casualties on his enemies without sustaining large casualties himself. He hoped that he could attack an important point along the French line and then wait on the tactical defensive, thwarting inevitable French counter-attacks. By doing so he hoped to 'bleed France white' and compel their government to sue for peace. This was the first spark of the idea that would become the Battle of Verdun.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF VERDUN

Aside from vague historical significance – which many historians now dispute – Verdun, at the very least, carried with it some important tactical advantages for a German attack. The French position constituted a salient, which meant that the Germans could attack the French from three directions at once. Furthermore, the French position in early 1916 left them with their backs to the river, meaning retreat would be very difficult, if not impossible. The German side of the battlefield

was thickly wooded, which would help mask the build-up of German forces before the attack. Furthermore, this build-up would be facilitated by an excellent rail network, most of which – 11 out of 14 rail lines – had in fact been built by the Germans. In comparison the French had only two suitable rail lines feeding into their side of the sector. This meant that Germany could much more easily sustain their efforts, and might be able to simply overload the French logistical train if they could maintain a high-enough level of intensity.

German intelligence had learned that the forts in and around Verdun had been stripped of much of their artillery, so the Germans knew that the French were weaker in the Verdun sector than they had ever been. This was compounded by the relative quietness of the region, which had lulled the French into a false sense of security. Their trench networks were nowhere near as developed as those in other, more active, sectors along the Western Front.

There may have been sound strategic and tactical advantages to Falkenhayn's plan, but he would have a difficult time translating his vision to those under him who would actually



*French long gun battery overrun by the German forces*



*The city of Verdun lies along the Meuse River, a strategically important feature in France's history*



## CROWN PRINCE WILHELM

Son of the Kaiser and the nominal commander of the German forces during Verdun

Son of the last 'Caesar' of 'Germania' the Crown Prince fulfilled his old ancestral duty of commanding military forces in the field. As archaic as it now seems, the Crown Prince was not the only German military leader who was awarded his command by dint of his birth. Many of the senior German generals were from the aristocracy, and some of them proved remarkably talented; most notably Rupprecht, Crown Prince of Bavaria.

The Crown Prince is often chalked up as one of those most opposed to, even disgusted by, the war. This is probably an exaggeration, and one that principally arises from comparing the Crown Prince to his father, who was famously fond of all things military. Despite his apparent distaste for the war the Crown Prince did agree with Falkenhayn on certain aspects of the Verdun battle, including the need for secrecy and the importance of surprise. Once battle began the Crown Prince did somewhat better than his critics expected him to do, but was nevertheless sidelined in November 1916 and forced to give up the command of Fifth Army. This fate befell commanders on both sides in the final months of 1916 and is not a fair verdict on his command.





have to carry it out. Despite staking out a baldly attrition strategy, Falkenhayn could not tell his subordinates that this was his ultimate goal – the effect on morale would have been utterly crushing. How many soldiers would happily have gone over the top knowing that their commanders saw them as taking part in a pure numbers game? Some tangible goal had to be offered: the city of Verdun itself.

Despite Falkenhayn's strong efforts to avoid anything that might even vaguely resemble a French-style all-out attack, the tactical planning for the offensive soon took on a life of its own. Even those who understood Falkenhayn's broad intentions failed to understand the implementation that the general was hoping for, frequently pushing too far, and seeking to conquer too much.

Confusion and miscommunication were perhaps to be expected from an organisation with such an impersonal and secretive leader. Falkenhayn was adamant that any discussion of the upcoming battle – codename: *Gericht* – must happen in person. No written records were to be left behind, to avoid the possibility of a leak. None of the armies along the Western Front were given clear instruction on what Falkenhayn expected of them, not even Fifth Army, situated in the Verdun sector. His planning for Verdun was so opaque that even now we have very little documentary evidence for it. We have to piece together thin scraps of material to paint a picture of what he was after, and how he conceived of the battle.

Perhaps making the problem worse, Fifth Army was headed by none other than the Kaiser's son: Kronprinz Wilhelm. On the one hand, having the Kronprinz lead the battle opened up the possibility for a major political victory, not just for Germany but for hereditary monarchy in general – a grand dynastic victory for the

## “THE GERMANS KNEW THAT THE FRENCH WERE WEAKER IN THE VERDUN SECTOR THAN THEY HAD EVER BEEN”

Hohenzollerns. Nevertheless, the Kronprinz was not a true professional soldier, and to some had to be ‘handled’ by expert military advisors. While this did not necessarily render sound military judgement impossible, it did introduce the possibility of the Kronprinz meddling where perhaps he should not.

Despite these planning woes, Fifth Army did a reasonably good job of preparing itself for the upcoming battle. Its intelligence circulated a note around which said that they expected a French attack to be launched in February. The hope was that the note would fall into French hands and act as a sort of cover for the preparations Fifth Army was making in January, and February to their trench systems.

They also improved their aerial reconnaissance and more aggressively fought to maintain control of the air. A substantial amount of digging was also required to construct the necessary dug-outs, trenches and depots from which the attack would be launched. Most of the digging was conducted at night, to help mask the amount of effort the army was making. The long nights of January and February were a helpful ally here.

As the day of the attack neared, and new army corps began to appear in the sector, they were kept further away from the front, out of sight of French eyes. Instead they were only cycled into the line immediately before the attack went in, to avoid the French noticing the introduction of new, fresh units to the sector. These efforts, combined with a fortuitous snowstorm, would effectively mask the German attack, and on 21 February 1916 the French were caught entirely off-guard.

On 12 July, the fate of Verdun, France's ancient bastion, was all but secured. After nearly five months of hammering away at French positions, winning success after success and inching ever closer to that citadel on the Meuse River, the German army was within reach of Verdun. There was only one last obstacle: Fort Souville.

This fort rested on the last imposing heights before Verdun. From there the Germans could easily swamp the ruined Fort Saint-Michel – standing modestly atop a hill just 344 metres tall – and be in a position to assault Verdun directly. The artillery preparation began on 10 July at 12pm; the Germans would concentrate 330,000 shells on an area just 25 kilometres square. To this the French would add nearly 200,000 shells in counter-bombardments. More than 500,000 shells fell within 20 hours. The Germans threw Operation ‘*Croix Verte*’ into this din, with the launch of 63,000 artillery shells, filled with deadly phosgene gas, against French artillery positions.

Sergeant Marc Boasson described the gas attack as: ‘A gripping spectacle; little by little, we saw the country disappear, the valley become filled with an ashy coloured smoke, clouds grow and climb, things turn sombre in this poisoned fluid. The odour of gas, slightly soapy, occasionally reached us despite the distance. And at the bottom of the cloud one heard the rumble of explosions, a dull noise like a muffled drum.’

The intensity of the bombardment and counter-bombardment was immense, and losses were heavy on both sides before the attack was even launched. The Bavarian Alpen, an elite formation tasked with assaulting Souville, suffered heavily.



*French soldiers charge out of their trench with bayonets fixed*

**LEFT:** French troops passing through the ruins of Verdun. There is a dark timelessness to shattered buildings, echoing across time from scenes like this to Homs, Syria today

**“HOW MANY SOLDIERS WOULD HAPPILY HAVE GONE OVER THE TOP KNOWING THAT THEIR COMMANDERS SAW THEM AS TAKING PART IN A PURE NUMBERS GAME?”**



Its 140th Infantry Regiment was hit especially hard; the regiment's 2nd battalion had lost virtually all of its officers. The Bavarian Guard had lost seven of its eight trench mortars, plus 37 dead and 83 wounded before even going over the top. Other units in the regiment refused to advance due to heavy losses.

Those elements of the Alpen Korps that fought on, did so through dense gas, and were met with intense French machine gun and artillery fire. Despite heavy losses they pressed on to within 500 metres of Fort Souville. The French, on their side, launched manic and poorly organised counterattacks to try to stem the tide. General Charles 'the butcher' Mangin sent men from

## **"SUCH WEAK EFFORTS HAD NO HOPES OF SUCCESS, AND DESPITE THEIR LOSSES GERMAN TROOPS STOOD READY TO ASSAULT FORT SOUVILLE ON THE MORNING OF 12 JULY"**

the 114e RI (régiment d'infanterie) to futile night attacks. Confused and disoriented they attacked in the wrong direction, suffering heavy casualties. Such weak efforts had no hopes of success, and despite their losses, German troops stood ready to assault Fort Souville on the morning of 12 July. The fate of Verdun would be sealed on the glacis of Fort Souville shortly after 9am.

Without officers, hemmed in by intense artillery fire, a small remnant of the 140th IR (German infantry regiment) found themselves unable to withdraw and rejoin their comrades. Instead, they chose to advance, sending forward a section of just 30 men (Section Bayer of 2nd Company). Alone, they stormed up the glacis of Fort Souville at 9am on 12 July.

*A German soldier takes up a position next to a corpse, thought to be French, near Fort Vaux*





The defenders of the fort were hardly in a better position. Commanded by the 65-year-old Lieutenant-Colonel Astruc de Saint-Germain, the garrison had for days been sealed off by a curtain of fire and steel, hammered by German artillery, and deluged with poison gas. One company of reinforcements under Lieutenant Dupuy had been sent to pass through the German artillery barrage separating the fort from the rest of the French army; only 60 men survived to reach the fort. It was these same men that defended the glacis from the haggard assault of Section Bayer.

These 90 French and German soldiers, worn and weathered, would decide the fate of Verdun. Section Bayer attacked and was met with Dupuy's machine guns; their rapid chatter silenced the German assault. Fort Souville, and so Verdun, was safe. After 12 July the Germans would have no hope of capturing that grand objective.

By now the Battle of the Somme was raging, pulling German attention, men and materiel northwards. Yet, the Verdun battle ground on

for another five months. It had taken on a life of its own, living on only by some internal logic, which compelled the French to launch a series of costly counterattacks to regain the ground lost since February that same year. The great events of history are so often larger than the men and women who populate and perpetuate them – they seemingly have willpower unto themselves. This article explores the life, nature and impact of this, the longest battle of World War I: Verdun.

## 21-23 FEBRUARY

The battle of Verdun began on 21 February 1916, after many weeks of preparation through harsh winter conditions. To begin, the Germans unleashed a dense artillery bombardment on French positions in the sector. Even though many French soldiers had expected the attack, the sheer weight of fire was overwhelming.

The Germans under Crown Prince Wilhelm, the son of Kaiser Wilhelm, had managed to sneak an additional 160 batteries of heavy and super-heavy guns into the sector without the French noticing. This was roughly half as many heavy guns as the entire French army, 2.6 million strong, had marched to war with just 18 months prior.

The initial German bombardment was awe-inspiring. French aviators couldn't place the enemy batteries in this din; too many were firing too rapidly from all directions. Most of this bombardment was focused on the triangle Brabant-Ornes-Verdun. Against a front of roughly 40 kilometres, the Germans launched 1 million shells, many of them filled with lachrymatory or poison gas. The fire was so thick that French runners couldn't penetrate it, isolating forward French positions and breaking their systems for command and control.

This initial bombardment lasted for nine hours, from 7am to 4pm. Then, the attack went in. French defenders braced themselves for the expected hordes of German forces to come swarming across No Man's Land; the Germans, however, had a different idea.

Instead of launching the sort of 'massed' attack that had become the norm on the Western Front, they surreptitiously sent small packets of men across No Man's Land – in some areas a vast 800 metres wide – to gently probe and prick the French line, testing for any weaknesses. The Germans seemed to be practicing the sort of warfare that officers like Philippe Pétain had been advocating for the French troops: the artillery conquers, the infantry occupies.

**"HE IS SIMULTANEOUSLY THE MAN WHO SAVED VERDUN AND ALSO THE PRESIDENT OF VICHY FRANCE WHO COLLABORATED WITH THE NAZI REGIME"**

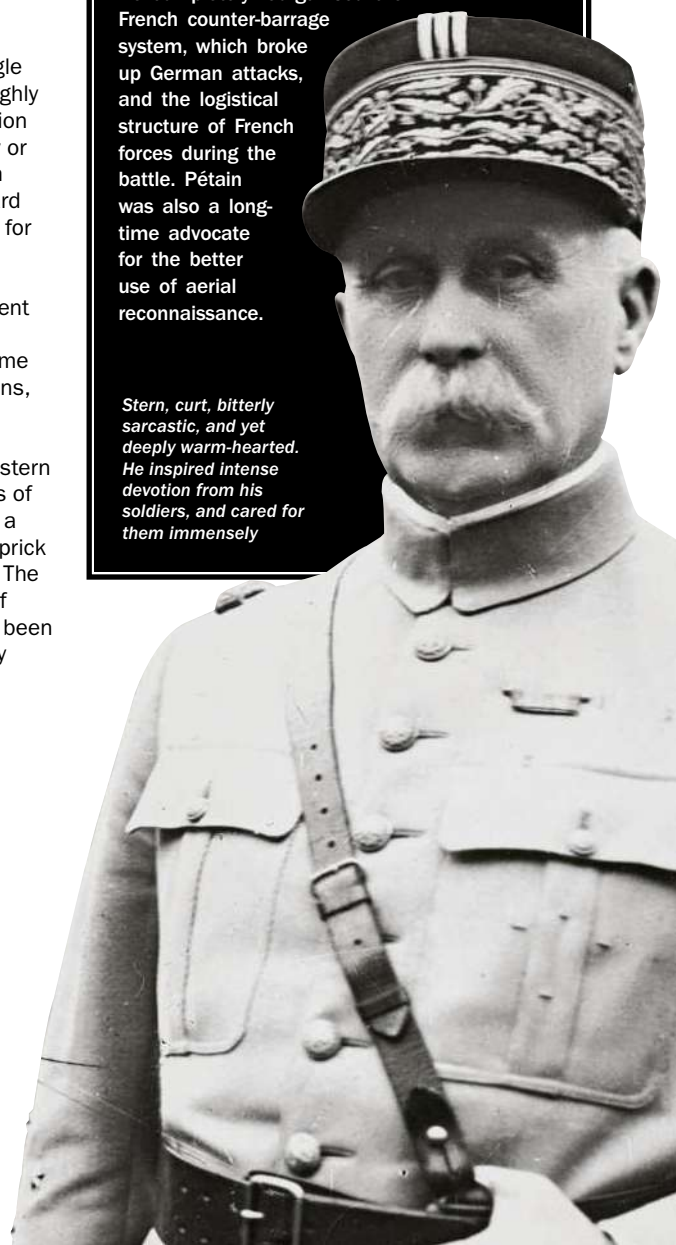
## THE RISE OF PETAIN

The saviour of Verdun, a caring commander yet a strict disciplinarian, a Marshal of France, a commander-in-chief and later Nazi collaborator

Philippe Pétain has a complicated history and occupies a bizarre place in historical memory. He is simultaneously the man who saved Verdun and also the President of Vichy France who collaborated with the Nazi regime. A position he won in part because of the reputation he won in World War I.

In WWI he is known for his tactical caution, and his desire to preserve the lives of his men above all other considerations. This made him hugely popular, and made him the obvious choice to succeed Nivelle during the French mutinies of 1917. At Verdun he did what he had always done: he insisted on a careful, scientific prosecution of the war. Pétain paid detailed attention to tactical minutia, especially the deployment of artillery. He completely reorganised the French counter-barrage system, which broke up German attacks, and the logistical structure of French forces during the battle. Pétain was also a long-time advocate for the better use of aerial reconnaissance.

*Stern, curt, bitterly sarcastic, and yet deeply warm-hearted. He inspired intense devotion from his soldiers, and cared for them immensely*





# VERDUN BATTLE MAP

Verdun was fought in a salient, presenting enormous logistical challenges

## 1. OPENING ASSAULT

The opening phase of the German Operation Gericht (sometimes translated as Operation 'judgement' or 'execution site'). The German III, V and XVIII Corps attacked French positions on the eastern bank of the Meuse. They advanced in small packets, often assisted by specialised assault teams armed with flamethrowers. Assault tactics – what might later be called 'stormtroop tactics' – were becoming more advanced by this stage of the war with both the French and Germans doing more to specialise the roles played by their infantry units.

## 2. BOIS DES CAURES

The bois des Caures was one of a series of wooded areas that provided stiffer-than-expected resistance to the initial German assault. Wooded areas remained some of the most feared along the Western Front. They provided excellent cover for defenders, especially from artillery. Wooded areas could also be used to funnel attackers into pre-determined fields of fire where overlapping machine gun posts would cut down attackers with enfilade fire. Emile Driant, parliamentarian and prolific author, died here commanding the 56th and 59th battalions of chasseurs à pied.

## 3. BRABANT AND SAMOGNEUX

The weight of the initial German assault fell further to the east, towards Haumont and Ornes. Nevertheless, the region around Brabant and Samogneux was critical. If the French fell apart here their position on the right bank would become isolated, and potentially even encircled. French forces with the river at their backs had no good avenue of escape, which greatly increased the likelihood that a minor defeat could turn into a rout.

## 4. RETAKING DOUAUMONT AND VAUX

In October, General Nivelle launched the first of two counteroffensives designed to recapture lost ground and take advantage of the severe mauling German troops had suffered on the Somme since July. The French fired off a huge number of shells (over 800,000) in their preliminary bombardment. This sort of shell expenditure would die off in 1917 as it was simply too costly. In the end, both Douaumont and Vaux were taken easily. The Germans had in part abandoned the area before the attack went in; perhaps a foreshadowing of the Nivelle Offensive.



LEFT: An aerial photo of Fort Douaumont taken by a German aircraft before the battle

**“THE FRENCH FIRED OVER A MILLION SHELLS, INUNDATING THE AREA. COMBINED WITH THE TIRED STATE OF GERMAN FORCES BY DECEMBER 1916 THIS ALL BUT GUARANTEED A RELATIVELY EASY FRENCH VICTORY”**

## 5. MORT-HOMME

After making substantial progress on the right bank in February, the German attack shifted towards the left bank in March. Normally, a salient would confer certain advantages to the defenders here, namely the advantage of interior lines. The geography (namely the river), however, actually put the French at a disadvantage when trying to fend off German attacks from multiple directions. French losses around Mort-Homme and Hill 304 were heavy.

## 6. FORT SOUVILLE

One of the 19 forts which made up the Fortified Region of Verdun, Fort Souville, wound up having an unexpected importance in July 1916. Despite the Battle of the Somme having begun on 1 July, some German units were still pressing forward in the Verdun sector. Had Souville fallen, it may have encouraged them to keep pushing, threatening to force the French defenders on the right bank of the Meuse into the river.

## 7. THE VOIE SACRÉE

World War I was an industrial war, and required industrial quantities of materiel. Not just shells, but food, water, corrugated iron, sandbags, and reinforcements needed to arrive in a very timely fashion, and en masse, at the front when needed. Because of the layout of the battlefield the French had to move this great mass of manpower and materiel up a narrow road and rail-line coming up from Bar-le-Duc. This 'Sacred Way' was the only French lifeline for the majority of the battle.

## 8. FINAL DECEMBER OFFENSIVE

The last offensive of the battle of Verdun would again be led by General Mangin. Launched in the direction of Ornes, it recaptured a reasonable chunk of the ground lost to the Germans ten months earlier in the frantic days of late-February. The French fired over a million shells, inundating the area. Combined with the tired state of German forces by December 1916 this all but guaranteed a relatively easy French victory. The sheer number of German prisoners caught (roughly 11,000) is testament to the state of German forces in Verdun.



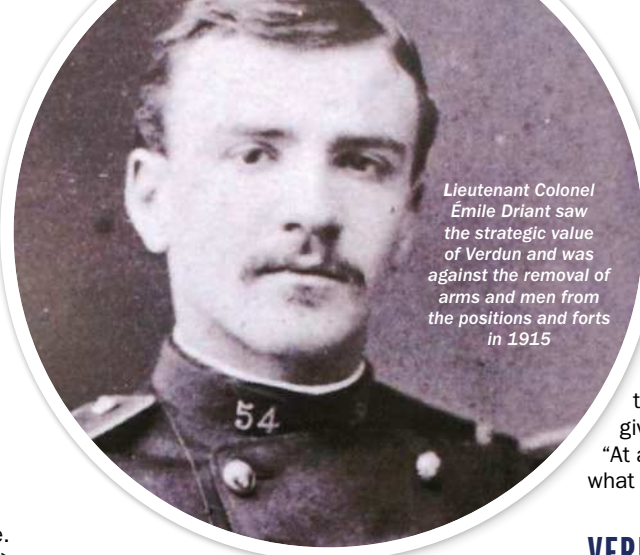
© Rocio Espin



At the bois (wood) d'Haumont the German attack, launched by a reserve Jäger battalion, consisted of just one adjutant and 53 men. These men were followed by a second wave 150 metres behind them consisting of one adjutant, 36 men and two flamethrowers. The third wave, also 150 metres back, consisted of a further 45 men. The Germans had expected the bombardment to kill or incapacitate French defenders, allowing these small teams to effectively take their objectives unopposed.

Of course, some French defenders did survive. At several places the survivors were chasseurs à pied, elite infantry. Despite suffering heavy losses in the opening bombardment – often two thirds of the unit would have been lost before the German infantry even came into sight – their training and morale made them hold on and do everything in their power to slow up the German advance. This vicious defence meant that, despite the overwhelming bombardment on 21 February, the French managed to only lose the bois d'Haumont, and the first positions in the bois des Caures, bois le Comte, bois de Ville, and at L'Herbebois.

In the centre of the line, Colonel Emile Driant's own battalion of chasseurs à pied held on tenaciously in the bois des Caures. By nightfall on 22 February his battalion consisted of just 94 men, down from a theoretical full strength of over 750 rifles. Driant himself was killed on 22



Lieutenant Colonel Émile Driant saw the strategic value of Verdun and was against the removal of arms and men from the positions and forts in 1915

The retreat from Brabant infuriated senior commanders. General Chrétien, commanding XXX CA, ordered the 72e DI to retake the village, having been told by his superior, General Fernand de Langle de Cary, commander of the Centre Army Group, that no parcel of land was to be voluntarily given up. Instead, land was to be defended, "At any price... cost what it may." This is exactly what Falkenhayn was hoping for.

## VERDUN UNDER PÉTAIN

Joseph Joffre, commander-in-chief of the French army, understood the seriousness of the situation and scrambled to keep Verdun from turning into a rout. The Germans continued to advance on the right bank of the Meuse, threatening to cut off French forces and roll up the flank of Verdun. Into this mess he hurled the Second Army, who had been in reserve, resting after its hard fight in Champagne a few months earlier.

Late on 24 February, Joffre called Second Army headquarters at Noailles and asked Pétain to come to his headquarters, GQG, at Chantilly. Pétain, however, was nowhere to be found. With his staff panicking, Pétain's long-time aide-de-camp, Serrigny, jumped into a staff car and raced off to Paris; he arrived at the Hôtel Terminus at the Gare du Nord Station at 3am. After arguing

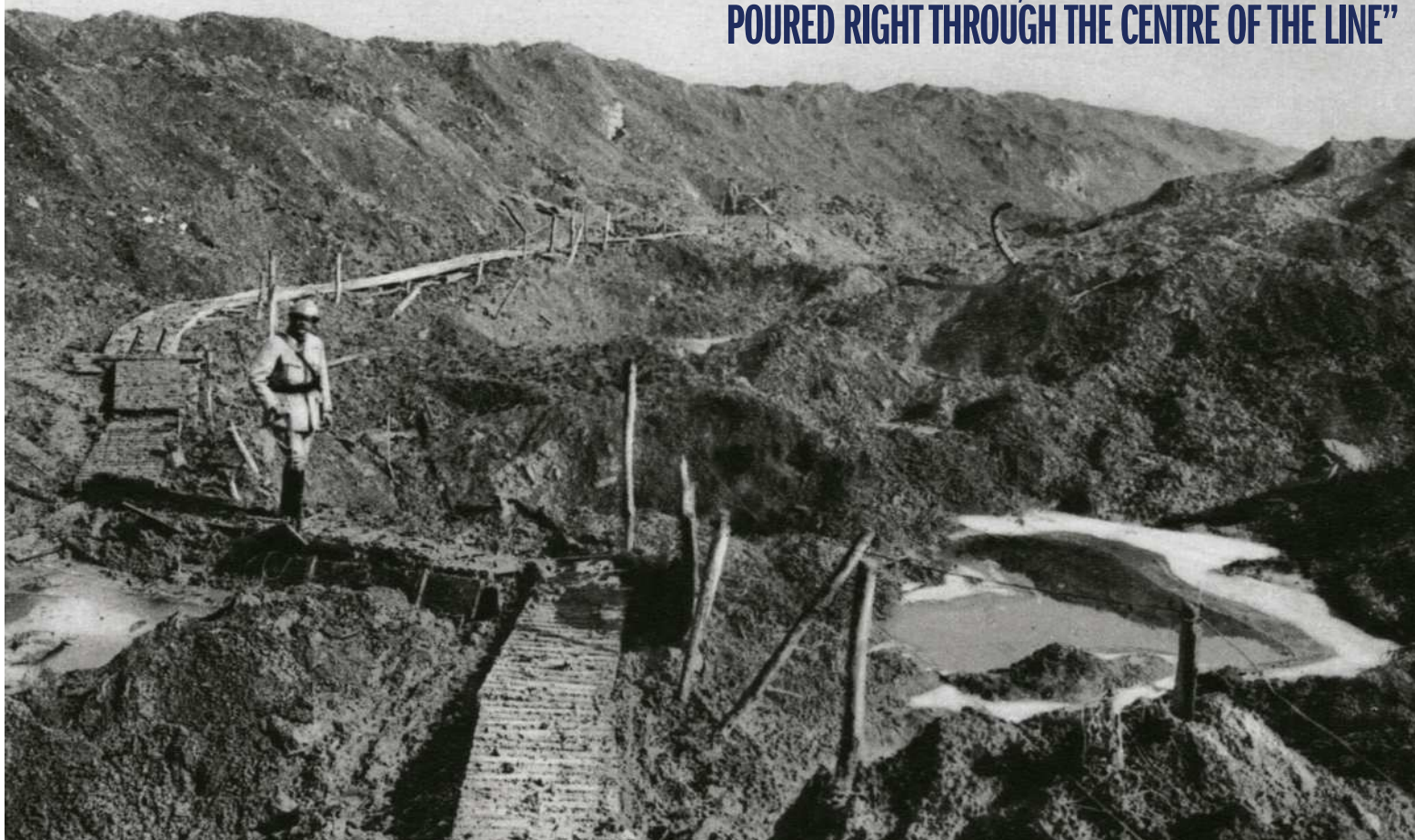
February while evacuating his command post, which had been zeroed by German 77mm guns. Without the brave resilience of Driant and his chasseurs, the Germans would have poured right through the centre of the line.

The situation continued to deteriorate badly as the battle progressed. French artillery was rapidly pulled back, the village of Brabant was given up without a fight, and the 72e DI (infantry division) that was defending it decided to pull back towards Samogneau.

Morale began to sink so low that one senior officer in the 72e DI (Lieutenant Colonel Bernard) ordered a detachment of machine guns to be held in reserve at Samogneau to enforce, "the obedience of those who might forget their duty".

The land around Fort Douaumont and Verdun was devastated by the battle

**"WITHOUT THE BRAVE RESILIENCE OF DRIANT AND HIS CHASSEURS, THE GERMANS WOULD HAVE POURED RIGHT THROUGH THE CENTRE OF THE LINE"**





*Adding a third dimension to the battlefield changed warfare forever*



## THE WAR ABOVE THE RFV

“We cannot hit what we cannot see” – paraphrase of General Emile Fayolle, 1915

Air power was a critical component of World War I. Above all else it was an extension of the artillery, the most important arm in the war. Before the Great War terrestrial observation usually provided enough information to prepare basic artillery bombardments and barrages. The sheer mass and depth of the fighting on the Western Front made this impractical. The problems of coordinating mass artillery fire were compounded by the geographic advantages that the Germans maintained throughout the war. After the Battle of the Marne, the Germans had the luxury of retreating back to a defensive line running along just about every significant piece of high ground in

northeastern France and Flanders. Air power became the only means for the Entente powers to actually see what they were firing at.

During Verdun it was essential for both sides. A mixture of fixed observation balloons and heavier-than-air platforms provided the intelligence required to orchestrate the artillery preparations both sides pursued in 1916. Pétain had long been interested in

the utility of air power. As far back as spring 1915, he argued in favour of a perpetual mapping of the enemy's lines through aerial reconnaissance. He dreamed of a vast, coordinated map of the enemy trenches so as to quickly respond to any enemy troop movements. Essentially, he was inventing a system that would not come into fruition until the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the advent of ‘kill-boxes’!

**“AIR POWER BECAME THE ONLY MEANS FOR THE ENTENTE POWERS TO ACTUALLY SEE WHAT THEY WERE FIRING AT”**

*The wreckage of a downed German bi-plane*





his way past the hotel manager, he eventually found himself outside of a hotel room staring at Pétain's boots resting in the hallway next to a pair of women's slippers. When Serrigny knocked on the door, Pétain answered, wearing "the scantiest of costumes", to learn that his army was being sent to Verdun. They were due to have an 8am meeting with Joffre, so once he had explained the situation, Serrigny got himself a room to sleep.

Pétain took command of the Verdun sector on 26 February at midnight and within hours he learned of the loss of Fort Douaumont. A small detachment of German troops had taken the fort by surprise without suffering any losses. The details of this loss were hidden from the public, who were instead told of a brave defence against insurmountable odds.

Undaunted, Pétain set about trying to repair the crumbling situation and paid especial attention to improving French logistics. Because Verdun was a salient, the French only had one real route into and out of the battlefield. This consisted of one light rail line and one road up from Bar-le-Duc, and made up the so-called Voie Sacrée, the 'Sacred Way', along which all of the men and materiel would have to travel. Before long, Pétain had the logistical network strengthened and running like clockwork. Over 4,000 lorries and ambulances would make a total of over 6,000 journeys up the Voie Sacrée each day. Vehicles traversed roughly a million miles each week transporting 90,000 men and 50,000 tonnes of supplies; at the height of the battle a lorry passed along the road every 14 seconds. It was a modern, automated, industrial system unlike any other at the time.

Combined with this logistical network, Pétain created what he called his 'Noria' system, which envisioned the Verdun battle and its logistical network as a great water wheel constantly taking water out of the battle and putting fresh resources in. Pétain made sure that men never had to spend more than a few days at the front. If they attacked, or were attacked, units would be immediately pulled out to rest. The general understood how crucially important it was to maintain the quality of his fighting divisions by not letting them be ground into dust.

The Germans, on the other hand, tended to leave units at the front for weeks at a time. The units lost their experienced soldiers and NCOs, making it more difficult for them to successfully integrate replacements. The heavy losses incurred also pushed morale to near the breaking point. Ironically, Pétain proved a much better attritional warrior than the Germans who started the battle with an expressly attritional model.

Pétain's reforms and refinements were important in shoring up the logistical and morale

**"THE DETAILS OF THIS LOSS  
WERE HIDDEN FROM THE PUBLIC,  
WHO WERE INSTEAD TOLD OF  
A BRAVE DEFENCE AGAINST  
INSURMOUNTABLE ODDS"**



*A French soldier lies partially buried in the soil, a casualty of the tactics to 'bleed France white'*



*German soldiers charge a French position using hand grenades and flamethrowers to clear a path*



problems facing the French, but alone they could not do much to stem the tide of German forces consistently making ground against ever-weaker French defenders. By 24 February, the French were down to just 86 heavy guns in the Verdun sector. The infantry was disorganised when Pétain arrived and all but incapable of defending themselves. The only thing that saved them in those critical early days was the German need to move their artillery forward, reorganise the trenches that they had already conquered, and extend their lines of supply. Simple Clausewitzian friction saved the French in the opening phase of the battle.

By the end of February the battle on the right (east) bank of the Meuse had slowed to a crawl, leading the Germans to change their axis of attack and begin striking French positions on the left bank. On 2 March, the Germans opened up with a stunning bombardment to rival that unleashed on 21 February. The first major infantry attack on the left (west) bank went in on 6 March, supported by fire from a German armoured train – their goal was the position of Mort-Homme.

The French responded with a furious counter-barrage, which should have substantially broken up the cohesion of the German attack and given French defenders a chance to hold on. In this

instance over 10,000 French shells fell into marshy land and failed to detonate, allowing the Germans to advance onwards, maintaining much of their strength.

The commander of the sector General Georges de Bazelaire responded by ordering every French unit to immediately retreat upon being attacked, regardless of the circumstances. At that point, maintaining morale and manpower was the only thing that mattered: the ground was already lost. Nevertheless, the 67e DI managed to lose 3,000 men over the course of 6-7 March. Because the French were now more prepared for German attacks, they were able to launch a counterattack the following day. At 7am, two battalions under Colonel Macker of the 92e RI attacked and retook two-thirds of the ground lost the previous day in and around the bois des Corbeaux in just 20 minutes. Colonel Macker had run out of water by this point, and so led the attack with a flask of cheap wine, his cane in his hand, and a cigar in his mouth: the epitome of a French officer of World War I.

All the while Pétain grew increasingly worried that his battered position would break, and urged Joffre to launch the Somme battle as soon as possible. Beginning to get worried himself, Joffre visited the Verdun front on 10 April 1916, the

same day that Pétain issued his famous order: 'Courage. On les aura!' ('We'll get 'em!'). Joffre had grown weary of Pétain's incessant requests of resupply and reinforcement and hoped to reignite an offensive spirit in the general.

It was during this trip that Joffre first saw General Robert Nivelle – the man who would succeed him as commander-in-chief – lead men in combat. Nivelle was wedded to the attack, and maintained a vigorous posture whenever possible. Even though his attacks were costly, and won no real strategic advantage, they caught Joffre's eye. Soon after this visit Joffre promoted Pétain, making him commander of the Centre Army Group, and promoted Nivelle to the head of Pétain's Second Army. This gave him tactical control of the battle from 26 April until its end in December. Pétain's critical leadership of the Battle of Verdun had lasted only two months.

As the months passed, the battle carried on along similar lines: attack and counterattack, with small areas of ground exchanging hands repeatedly, but on the whole tending to fall more and more into German possession.

The Germans crept closer to Verdun, eating up French manpower by the thousands. The strategic reserve that Joffre had hoped to use in a Franco-British attack astride the Somme river was chewed up in the Meuse Mill. Whereas Joffre and Foch's initial plan called for 40 French divisions to attack alongside the British on the Somme, the losses suffered at Verdun would mean that only 12 would go over the top on 1 July 1916.

Despite the small numbers, they managed to capture all of their objectives at the cost of only

**“COLONEL MACKER HAD RUN OUT OF WATER BY THIS POINT, AND SO LED THE ATTACK WITH A FLASK OF CHEAP WINE, HIS CANE IN HIS HAND, AND A CIGAR IN HIS MOUTH”**

*German troops pick their way past the fallen enemy. By the spring of 1916 the German advance was grinding to a halt*





1,560 casualties, a rather different experience compared to the well-known debacle of the British on the same day.

## THE COUNTERATTACKS

German pressure ebbed and flowed in the Verdun sector until July. Within a fortnight of the Somme offensive beginning, German attacks all but ceased. Whatever reserves the Germans had in the area were shuttled north to protect against the attacks in Picardy. Even before then, Nivelle had launched a series of counterattacks against the Germans. In late-May he ordered General Mangin to recapture Fort Douaumont.

Despite Mangin's blind confidence in his ability to retake the fort – and despite French efforts to assert control of the air, with six of the eight German observation balloons taken out – the attack was a disaster. The artillery preparation had been cut from five days to a little over two to save artillery shells for the Somme. The intense German counter-bombardment meant that French units were severely depleted before they even went over the top. Some of the lead companies – the 129e RI, for example – were down to only 45 men. On 22 May, at 11.50am, the attack went in anyway. By 12pm it had utterly failed.

Under Nivelle the French would eventually retake both forts Vaux and Douaumont, the latter

on 24 October 1916. This was hugely important for French morale and helped capstone the French army's long and arduous trial along the banks of the Meuse.

In strictly military terms, however, Douaumont's recapture was probably not terribly important. The Germans had already been pulling out of the sector – Vaux was recaptured without a fight – and the battle had long before descended into a series of brief, isolated engagements followed by long periods of quiet. After the failure to capture Fort Souville in July, the Germans did not make any more serious offensives in the sector.

French counteroffensives largely occurred in late-October and early-November with a brief flare-up in the middle of December. Long gone were the days of February to July, but nevertheless, this final phase is just as important.

Despite capturing only a few objectives of dubious military value, and at a high cost in casualties and munitions, Nivelle's recasting of Verdun as an offensive, rather than defensive, battle won him substantial praise.

Ultimately, it paved the way for his succession of Joffre as command-in-chief in December 1916. The path then would lead inexorably to the disastrous Nivelle Offensive of April 1917 and the French mutinies that followed. It was a final dark reminder of the burden borne by French soldiers along the banks of the Meuse in 1916.



**ABOVE:** French troops take shelter in a cramped trench for protection

## COUNTING THE COST

French and German losses were nearly identical at Verdun. So, who won?

During the Battle of Verdun, both the French and German armies lost around 350,000 casualties each, with the exact numbers still in contention. These figures sound shocking, but in reality it was only half as bad as the Somme, which saw roughly 600,000 casualties on either side. So, why does Verdun stick in our minds?

In part, this is owing to the horrific conditions in the Verdun salient, which were really archetypal for World War I: a true moonscape, complete with mud, blood, the dead and the dying. The sense of endless carnage for no real strategic gain (or loss) stuck in the minds of soldiers very early on.

It was here at Verdun that French soldiers were first heard bleating like sheep being led to the slaughter as they marched towards the sound of the guns. Pétain's 'Noria' system helped to reduce the stress and strain that his men experienced while operating in the Verdun sector.

Ultimately, there was only so much he could do to lessen the stress of suffering heavy casualties often in very short periods of time. On occasion, some units were being all but wiped out in a matter of days.

What did these 700,000 Verdun casualties mean? Following the battle, the Allies launched

major attacks on the Somme, in Galicia (the Brusilov Offensive) and in Italy. On the Western Front alone Germany had fewer than 1.2 million casualties (nearly as many as they had lost in 1914 and 1915 combined). In the second half of 1916 the Germans lost 26 per cent of their forces on the Western Front, and a further 15 per cent of the forces they had on the Eastern Front. The losses were staggering. In the brutal game of attrition, Germany was simply outnumbered and could not afford to lose simply equal numbers of men in battles against the powers of Britain, France and Russia.

*Cemetery to the fallen located at Douaumont. It contains 16,142 graves of known combatants*





# BATTLE OF JUTLAND

31 MAY 1916

After years of building up battleships to dominate the oceans, the British and German navies finally came to blows in the North Sea

In early 1916, the North Sea was far from the battleground it would become, as the Royal Navy continued its blockade of the Imperial German Navy. Admiral Reinhardt von Scheer's appointment that year changed things as he ordered his ships to break out against the British barricade. Across the water, the British had grown tired of months spent skirmishing with German vessels, and were already mobilising in response. The Royal Navy's Grand Fleet would finally face off against the German High Seas Fleet, as the results of the long arms race finally came to fruition.

## JUTLAND: THE AFTERMATH

How the end of the arms race produced bittersweet victory

For two very proud nations, the loss of ships was hard to take. Although no dreadnoughts were sunk, many destroyers and battle cruisers were lost by both navies, with Britain recording more casualties. Despite losing more vessels and manpower, the German retreat meant the Royal Navy now had undisputed control of the North Sea, but the lack of a stunning victory was not lost on the British public, who were expecting a success of Trafalgar proportions. The inconclusive result of the battle was disappointing to the military hierarchy as well, as it was hoped that these metal leviathans could turn the tide of the war.

Admiral Jellicoe was criticised by Churchill for not taking a riskier approach and it is true that if he hadn't feared a torpedo attack to such an extent, he could have knocked the German Navy out of the war at Jutland. However, this takes away from the key manoeuvres and tactics that Jellicoe exercised prior to this moment. So soon after one of the largest arms races of all time, the role of battleships had changed and the age of the submarines and aircraft carriers was about to begin.

## THE NAVIES OF JUTLAND

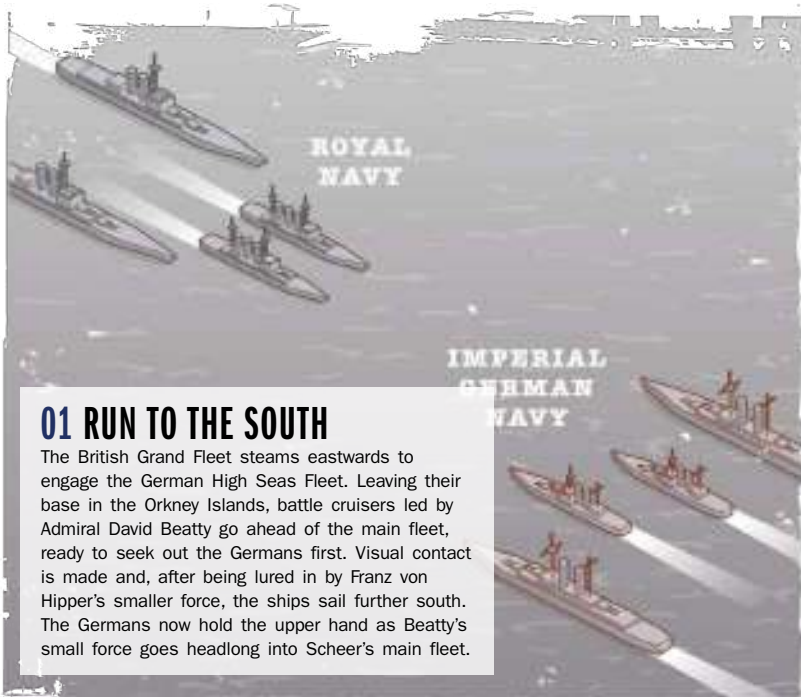
The strength of the two navies at WWI's defining sea conflict

	BRITISH GRAND FLEET	GERMAN HIGH SEAS FLEET
DREADNOUGHTS	28	16
PRE-DREADNOUGHTS	0	6
BATTLE CRUISERS	9	5
LIGHT CRUISERS	26	11
DESTROYERS	77	61
ARMoured CRUISERS	8	0
SEAPLANE CARRIERS	1	0
MINELAYERS	1	0



While no dreadnoughts were lost, three British battle cruisers and eight destroyers were sunk by the Germans at Jutland





## 01 RUN TO THE SOUTH

The British Grand Fleet steams eastwards to engage the German High Seas Fleet. Leaving their base in the Orkney Islands, battle cruisers led by Admiral David Beatty go ahead of the main fleet, ready to seek out the Germans first. Visual contact is made and, after being lured in by Franz von Hipper's smaller force, the ships sail further south. The Germans now hold the upper hand as Beatty's small force goes headlong into Scheer's main fleet.



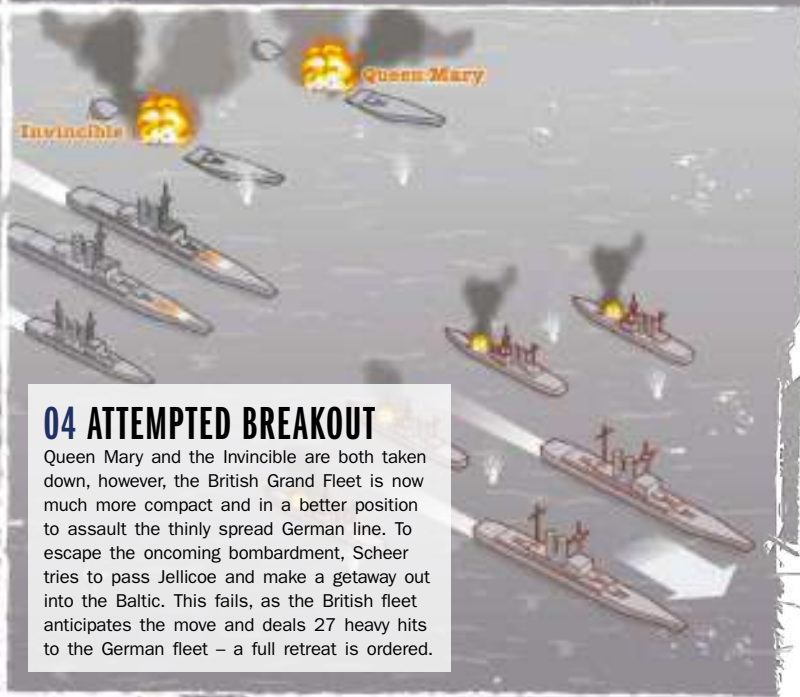
## 02 CRITICAL EARLY BLOWS

The first shots are fired by the Germans at 3.38pm; the Lion, Princess Royal and Tiger are all struck badly. The Royal Navy responds, shelling the Von der Tann and the Moltke. The first major vessel to sink is the British battle cruiser Indefatigable as it loses all but two of its crew. Chester is ambushed by German light cruisers but is saved by a timely intervention from the 3rd Battlecruiser Squadron.



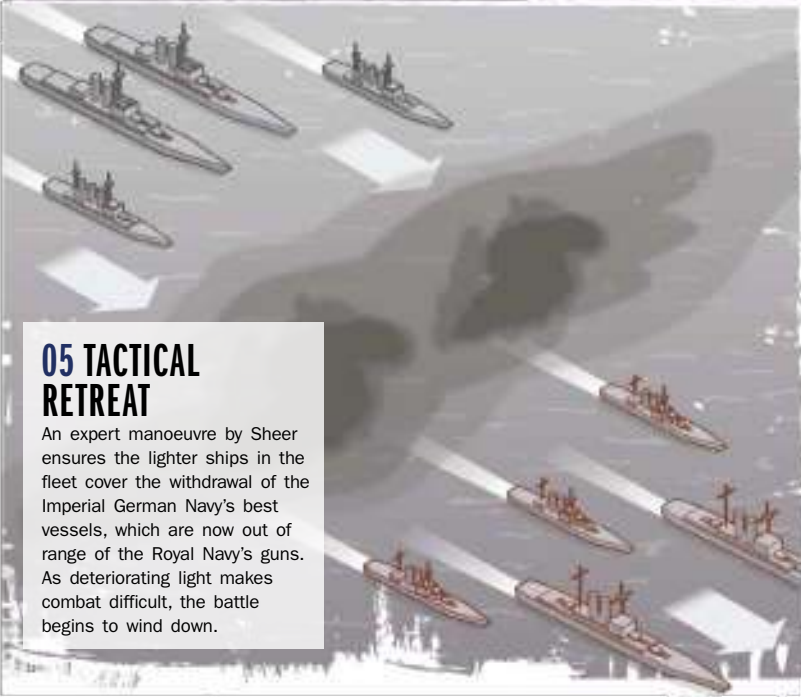
## 03 RUN TO THE NORTH

Beatty turns back to join up with the main British force that looms into view through the haze. Hipper orders his fleet to sail north as Admiral John Jellicoe's main battle fleet enters the fray. Jellicoe heads south, cutting the Germans off before they are aware of the British trap. As the fleets clash, the Lutzow is sunk and the Seydlitz and Derfflinger are badly damaged as the loss of the Indefatigable is avenged.



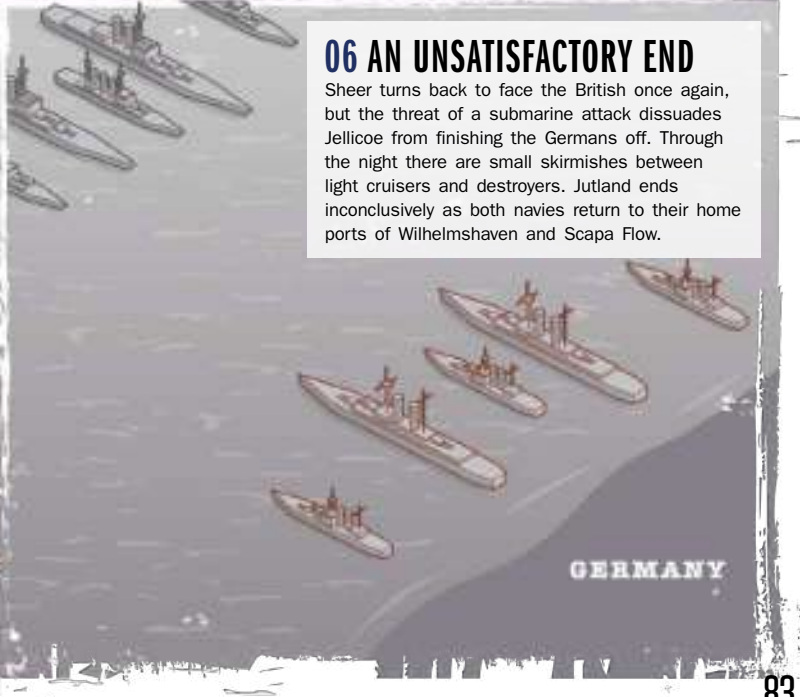
## 04 ATTEMPTED BREAKOUT

Queen Mary and the Invincible are both taken down, however, the British Grand Fleet is now much more compact and in a better position to assault the thinly spread German line. To escape the oncoming bombardment, Scheer tries to pass Jellicoe and make a getaway out into the Baltic. This fails, as the British fleet anticipates the move and deals 27 heavy hits to the German fleet – a full retreat is ordered.



## 05 TACTICAL RETREAT

An expert manoeuvre by Sheer ensures the lighter ships in the fleet cover the withdrawal of the Imperial German Navy's best vessels, which are now out of range of the Royal Navy's guns. As deteriorating light makes combat difficult, the battle begins to wind down.



## 06 AN UNSATISFACTORY END

Sheer turns back to face the British once again, but the threat of a submarine attack dissuades Jellicoe from finishing the Germans off. Through the night there are small skirmishes between light cruisers and destroyers. Jutland ends inconclusively as both navies return to their home ports of Wilhelmshaven and Scapa Flow.





# THE BRUSILOV OFFENSIVE

4 JUNE - 20 SEPTEMBER 1916

Perhaps the most successful Allied offensive of World War I, a Russian assault on the Eastern Front decimated Austro-Hungarian forces

**T**he story of Imperial Russia's participation in World War I is a tale of ineptitude and cataclysmic disaster, overshadowing the performance of one of its senior commanders and the offensive begun in the spring of 1916 that bears his name.

General Aleksei Brusilov planned and executed a Russian offensive against the Austro-Hungarian Army, prevailing against the enemy as well as

his own high command to bring the endeavour to fruition. Since its defeat at Tannenberg in 1914, the Russian Army had known little more than incompetence among its commanders, poor training, supply shortages, and death on a grand scale. Brusilov, however, was an exception within the Russian command structure. Admired by his troops, he advocated offensive action where possible, while also developing tactics that would later be proven successful on the battlefield.

During the winter of 1916, the French fortress city of Verdun was under siege by strong German forces and in danger of falling to the enemy. Such a defeat would cause chaos on the Western Front, and French military leaders looked to their allies, the British and Russians, to mount offensive actions that might compel the Germans to transfer forces to other threatened areas and relieve the pressure on Verdun. During meetings the previous December, the Allies had already



agreed to initiate simultaneous offensive efforts against Germany and Austria-Hungary in a concerted effort to spread the enemy's resources to the breaking point.

In response to the renewed urgency of the situation at Verdun, the British planned an offensive along the River Somme, which got underway in early July 1916. The Russians, though, responded more swiftly. Their first offensive was launched in March near Lake Narocz in modern-day Belarus, but the operation simply produced the latest disaster for the Russians. Their troops

were slaughtered in great numbers by German artillery, machine guns, and poison gas. Within a month the Russian Army was forced to retire. At the same time, the high command, or Stavka, had begun planning a second offensive around Vilna, now in Polish territory.

Amid this second round of discussions, Brusilov, recently replacing General Nikolai Ivanov as commander of the Southwest Front (Army Group), stepped forward and suggested his

command could launch an offensive that would complement the proposed assault, reasoning that the enemy's forces would be weakened in dealing with a second threat. He prodded his superiors during meetings in the spring of 1916, and grudgingly they approved his action although some of his peers were vocal in their dissent.

Brusilov commanded four Russian armies in the southwest, together numbering more than 1.7 million soldiers split into 61 divisions. He ordered each of his subordinate generals to begin planning. He chose the city of Lutsk, now in the Ukraine, as the focus of his opening

attack against the Austro-Hungarian 4th Army, commanded by Archduke Joseph Ferdinand. Brusilov took full advantage of reconnaissance and detailed maps to determine the weak points along an otherwise impressive enemy defensive line. He ordered advance trenches to be dug within 100 metres (325 feet) of the Austro-Hungarian perimeter and established forward units that would rapidly identify and exploit any defensive weaknesses.

Brusilov developed six primary tenets for successful offensive operations. Multiple points of attack would prevent the enemy from concentrating its reserves against a single rupture of the defensive line while spreading confusion during the response to the initial assaults. The area of general attack should be greater than 30 kilometres (18.7 miles). The duration of the preliminary artillery bombardment should be relatively brief, less than five hours. Artillery should be moved to firing positions in secrecy and subsequently operate in cooperation with infantry thrusts. Strategic reserves should take up forward positions early in the offensive and join in the rout once the enemy front line had been breached. Trench lines should be dug as close to the enemy as possible prior to launching the offensive.

On 4 June 1916, Brusilov gave the order to attack along a 322-kilometre (200-mile) front from the foothills of the Carpathian Mountains in Bukovina in the southwest to the Pripet Marshes in the north. Over 2,000 Russian artillery pieces thundered, and this opening barrage did in fact differ from others that were characteristic of World War I. Its fire was highly accurate, actually disrupting Joseph Ferdinand's birthday party in Lutsk, while its duration was limited according to Brusilov's instructions in order to conserve

**“GRUDGINGLY THEY APPROVED  
HIS ACTION, ALTHOUGH SOME  
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THEIR DISSENT”**

## THE VISIONARY GENERAL

Aleksei Brusilov commanded Russian troops in their greatest feat of arms during World War I

At the time of his great offensive in the summer of 1916, General Aleksei Brusilov was a 63-year-old cavalryman. Born into an aristocratic family the city of Tiflis in Georgia, he was the son of a general who had fought against Napoleon. He graduated from the Imperial Corps of Pages, a military academy of Imperial Russia, and was assigned as an ensign to the 15th Dragoon Regiment in 1872. He served as an instructor at the cavalry school in St Petersburg and by 1900 had risen in rank to major general.

When World War I broke out, Brusilov was given command of the 8th Army in Galicia. He was awarded the Sword of Saint George with Diamonds for his victory during the 1916 offensive and was one of only eight Russian officers to be so honoured during the First World War.

With the upheaval of the Bolshevik Revolution, he called for the Tsar's abdication although he had previously been a monarchist. He was appointed commander-in-chief of the Russian Army in 1917 but opposed Russia's separate peace with Germany and was removed. He later served with the Red Army, wrote his memoirs of the Great War, and died in Moscow in 1926.



*Russian General Aleksei Brusilov led the most successful Allied offensive effort of World War I*



ammunition, avoid making the terrain over which the Russian troops were supposed to advance impassable, and limit the recovery time of Austro-Hungarian troops before they were assaulted. One other telling effect of the bombardment was the number of casualties inflicted on the enemy. Prior to the onslaught the Austro-Hungarians outnumbered the Russians in the area 200,000 to 150,000. When it was over, the number of ground troops was roughly equivalent.

When the Austro-Hungarian front line was obliterated, the Russians stormed through the breach at Lutsk, capturing more than 25,000 enemy soldiers on the first day of the offensive. Achieving complete surprise, the 8th Army made the decisive breakthrough around the village of Olyka, and many Austro-Hungarian soldiers surrendered without firing a shot. Although Russian casualties were heavy, Brusilov's new tactics were validated swiftly and even copied by the Germans later during their Michael Offensive on the Western Front in 1918.

Just 48 hours after jumping off, the Russians had ruptured the Austro-Hungarian lines on a 20-kilometre (12.5-mile) front and penetrated 75 kilometres (47 miles). Soon, the Austro-Hungarian Army was in full retreat. More than 130,000 of its troops were either dead or wounded, and 200,000 had been taken prisoner. The German high command demanded the sacking of Joseph Ferdinand, and he was summarily relieved of duty.

Preoccupied with his own offensive against the Italian Army at Trentino on the southern front, Austrian theatre commander Field Marshal Conrad von Hötzendorf was forced to abandon that effort to send troops and artillery eastward in the hope of stemming the Russian tide. Although the Russians sustained tremendous casualties and Brusilov had been criticised for tactics that exacted a heavy toll in blood, the ripple effect of his offensive was felt all the way to Verdun.

While he confidently waited for the French fortress city to fall into his hands like a ripe plum, General Erich von Falkenhayn, chief of the German General Staff, was shocked by the revelation of the reverses in the East. To stave off a defeat of epic proportions, Falkenhayn transferred four German divisions from the Verdun region to bolster the flagging Austro-Hungarians hundreds of miles away. With Falkenhayn's order, Brusilov had achieved at least a measure of his strategic objective. The French mounted a counterattack at Verdun on 23 June and pushed the Germans back, while the British finally launched their offensive along the Somme a week later.

Meanwhile, Brusilov was ill-served by his own countrymen. As his own ranks were being depleted during prolonged operations, an expected concurrent offensive by Russian armies of the West Front, under the command of General Aleksei Evert, failed to materialise as planned. Evert had been an opponent of the offensive



**ABOVE** Brusilov had an immense influence on the evolution of offensive tactics in warfare, even after his death, despite being criticised heavily in his lifetime



Russian soldiers charge from a treeline into an open field during the early stages of the Brusilov Offensive



Hundreds of Austro-Hungarian prisoners captured during the Brusilov Offensive stream toward the rear under heavy guard



## “THE RUSSIANS ENCOUNTERED LOGISTICS AND SUPPLY PROBLEMS DURING THE WEEKS-LONG ADVANCE, WHILE LINES OF COMMUNICATION HAD BEEN STRETCHED TO THEIR LIMITS”

actions from the beginning, preferring to remain entrenched in static defensive positions. Evert enjoyed the favour of Tsar Nicholas II, and the two colluded to stall the launch of the Western Front's offensive, changing its objectives during months of frivolous planning and allowing the Germans in the East to transfer forces to blunt the effort when it was finally launched. Eventually, 17 German divisions were also moved from France and Belgium to the Eastern Front.

Brusilov later lamented, “The attack on Baranovich took place, but, as it was not difficult to foresee, the troops suffered huge losses with total failure, and this ended the fighting activities of the Western Front to facilitate my offensive. The Western Front did not inflict the main blow... The names of Evert and, in particular, Kuropatkin (commander of the Russian Army's Northwest Front), were condemned, and Evert was also ranked as a traitor.”

By early August, the Brusilov Offensive had begun to lose momentum. The Russians had

sustained 500,000 casualties while inflicting nearly 1.5 million on the enemy. About 400,000 Austro-Hungarian soldiers had been captured. The Austro-Hungarian Army lost capacity to function as an offensive fighting force and was relegated to holding trench lines for the rest of the war. However, the Russians encountered logistics and supply problems during the weeks-long advance, while lines of communication had been stretched to their limits. On 20 September, the offensive was suspended after wresting 25,000 square kilometres (9,652 square miles) of territory from the control of the Central Powers, more than any other Allied offensive of the war.

Brusilov was hailed a hero, but his detractors point to the cost of his offensive in men and materiel. The effort may have weakened the Russian Army to the point where it hastened the coming of the Bolshevik Revolution and the end of the Tsarist monarchy. Even so, those who remember Brusilov admit his innovative tactics reshaped the modern battlefield.



**ABOVE** Unfortunate Archduke Joseph Ferdinand of Austria-Hungary was relieved of command following the Brusilov Offensive that shattered his army in 1916



1916

# SOMME

## A LOST GENERATION

1 JULY - 18 NOVEMBER 1916

As the body count began to escalate on the Western Front, British men were recruited straight from the factories to the frontline





On 1 July 1916, tens of thousands of British soldiers marched into the jaws of death. It would become the bloodiest day in the history of the British Army; nearly 20,000 Tommies were killed for little territorial gain. Almost 30,000 more were wounded.

What was supposed to be the scintillating start of the push towards defeat of the Central Powers became a bloodbath as thousands of men walked into the crosshairs of German MG 08s.

The men who bore the brunt of the machine-gun fire were part of Herbert Kitchener's New Army, a force assembled to provide Britain with the extra military muscle that would help turn the tide of the war. Conscription wasn't popular back home, but Kitchener, the secretary of state for war, devised another way to bolster the ranks: a recruitment campaign appealing to single men between the ages of 18 and 41 to fight for king and country. The British Army only numbered 250,000 at the start of the war and, although highly trained, this was not enough for a conflict on this scale. The call to arms recruited an extra 500,000 men as the British Army, a professional force, took on a new wave of volunteers who would become the spine of a new look military.

Each volunteer signed for a three-year contract. Fired up by patriotism, for many their first major offensive would be the Somme. In the opposing trenches stood the most formidable land force in the world, a conscript army that had trained for years: the Imperial German Army. Going up against them would be these British boys, oblivious to the true horrors of war. The artillery fell silent and the officer's whistles were blown. It was time to go over the top.

*A church service is held at a camp in Basingstoke but some of the members of the Irish 10th Division seem more interested in the camera*







## WHY THE SOMME?

Affectionately known as 'Papa Joffre', Joseph Joffre called the shots in the lead up to the Somme Offensive

The Allied High Command decreed that northern France was the theatre in which the war would be won or lost. Joseph Joffre, commander in chief of the French military, called a meeting at Chantilly on 29 December 1915 to reveal his new idea. The plan was for a Franco-British offensive on an extensive front across the River Somme. The head of the French Army, General Ferdinand Foch, and British commander Henry Rawlinson weren't keen on the idea, and even Field Marshal Douglas Haig preferred an attack with naval support. A slightly reluctant agreement was reached when Germany unleashed a devastating attack on Verdun on 21 February 1916. If successful, the new front would reduce the almost unbearable pressure on the French and punch a hole into the German resolve – a war of attrition that would grind the German war machine into the dust.

## THE PALS BATTALIONS

Since the outbreak of war in 1914, posters of Kitchener had adorned notice boards all over Britain and more than 20 million recruitment leaflets had been printed. The aim was to create a civic pride and even a friendly rivalry between cities to spur the men on to sign up. It seemed to work, as in Liverpool, for instance, four battalions were raised in a number of days even though only one was actually requested. The news coming out of Merseyside encouraged other cities to repeat this feat, and the 'Pals Battalions' were born.

Munitions shortages, such as the shell crisis of 1915, had an adverse effect on the training of these new troops. Many of the drills were carried out with wooden poles and broomsticks in the place of rifles, and the men slept in makeshift barracks. As all the experienced troops were already at the front, the new recruits had to be trained by elderly and retired soldiers, who knew little of modern warfare. The training and lifestyle was quite simply a world away from facing German machine guns at the Somme. This training continued until the summer of 1916, when the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) needed support more than ever. The time had come for the men of the Pals Battalions to head

for the coast and fields of Northern France. 557 battalions of fresh-faced Tommies had no idea of the storm they were heading in to.

Waterloo station was awash with recruits from all across the British Isles, eager to get a piece of the action. It was so hectic that mounted police were even called in to keep the crowds in check. There were 1,000 men from the Lancashire town of Accrington and a full strength battalion from Sheffield full of stockbrokers, students, journalists and teachers. A headmaster in Grimsby had even raised a company of 250 schoolboys and offered them to the local battalion for service. East Grinstead boasted a sportsmen's battalion that even included an England lightweight boxing champion. The full spectrum of society was present from public schoolboys to shop assistants. No British Army has ever incorporated such a high proportion of men acquired from local communities before or since.



## WHO WAS HERBERT KITCHENER?

The British public trusted and respected Kitchener after his success at the 1898 Battle of Omdurman in Sudan. During World War I, he was criticised for his support of the Gallipoli Campaign and role in the 'Shell Crisis'. He died in June 1916 when on board a ship sent to the depths by German mines.

## THE BOMBARDMENT BEGINS

The thunder of 1,500 British howitzers lasted for an entire week as 1.738 million shells were







fired at the enemy. This incredible barrage of missiles was one of the largest in history, and although it wasn't as targeted and thorough as perhaps Haig would have liked, it was nonetheless a huge onslaught. What the British and French didn't know, however, was that the Germans had entrenched their bombproof shelters in the chalky soil of the Somme so well that the bombardment was largely nullified. Even the barbed wire, which was notoriously thick and tangled, survived much of the shelling. However, the Allied High Command couldn't know this, and the lack of accurate reconnaissance meant that when the barrage finally stopped, they fully expected the infantry to defeat what was left of the enemy with ease. Sadly, this was not to be the case, and when the bombing subsided, the Germans manned

their machine guns knowing an infantry rush would not be far away.

The soldiers may have gleefully sung as they waited in the trenches, but on that fateful summer's day they were a collection of individuals, not an army that would bring the main player within the Central Powers crashing down. Haig had initially wanted to delay the attack as he believed that with further training his forces would be able to unleash a more effective attack. However, France could not hold Verdun for any longer. The ill-fated assault got under way at 7.30am.

### A BLACK DAY FOR THE BRITISH

The 36th (Ulster) Division is believed to have been the only unit to maintain ground for a

**"WE BEAT 'EM ON THE MARNE,  
WE BEAT 'EM ON THE AISNE,  
WE GAVE 'EM HELL AT  
NEUVE CHAPELLE AND  
HERE WE ARE AGAIN"**

*A Tommy song from the war*

### THE VERDUN EFFECT

With the French focusing on the Battle of Verdun, more British divisions had to step up. The BEF had been severely depleted, so the new recruits were desperately needed for the Somme Offensive. A mighty 27 divisions were ready to 'bash the Boche' on day one of the Somme, with 19 of these made up of New

Army recruits. These 750,000 British men faced off against 16 divisions of the German Second Army. The Somme was the first time Britain had deployed an army of this size against the core of the German military machine. Although the French were preoccupied with Verdun, they mustered 11 divisions, which were positioned on the south end of the front. Their assistance was invaluable.





# A BRITISH TOMMY AT THE SOMME

## RIFLE

The long-standing weapon of choice, this model of the Lee Enfield rifle was first used in 1907 and was of a .303in short magazine design.

## BISCUIT TINS

The Tommies were made easier to spot by metal triangles on their back that glistened in the sun. This, however, made it easier for the Germans to latch their crosshairs onto them.

## EQUIPMENT

120 rifle rounds were carried by each soldier along with a two-pint water bottle to quench thirst while they were in the heat of battle.

## HELMET

The Brodie helmet became standard issue by summer 1916 and was cheap and easy to mass produce. Lower velocity bullets would dent the helmet but not penetrate.

## BAYONET

When things got close and personal with the Germans, a bayonet could get a Tommy out of trouble. The 40-centimetre-long blade could do some serious damage up close.

## UNIFORM

A four-pocket khaki service dress was worn along with brown leather ammunition boots. Both had to be durable to last out in the mud of the Somme.



The British war machine rumbles forward towards the frontline prior to the first day of the Somme Offensive



Wounded German soldiers are escorted behind the lines as Tommies watch on from their trenches

significant period of time on the first day. Out of the 720 Accrington pals who fought, 584 were killed or wounded, and the pals from Leeds, Grimsby and Sheffield lost similar numbers of men.

The day ended with minimal gains, but some companies had advanced into and taken Peake Trench, the German front position on the right flank of the front line in the Birch Tree Wood area. The first media reports emerged on 3 July, but the journalism was inaccurate to say the least. Both John Irvine's report for the *Daily Express* and an article by the *Daily Chronicle* were immensely positive about the events and made no mention of the slaughter. The reason for this is likely down to the sources being high-ranking military officers unaware of the plight of the Volunteer Army.

Away from the British media, casualty lists began to slowly reach the families of those who had given up their lives on the first few days of the Somme. Villages, neighbourhoods, and the communities within them back home would never be the same.





### BRITISH 3RD ARMY

**01** By mid July, the British had captured both Mametz Wood and Contalmaison as they made costly yet crucial inroads into the German defences.

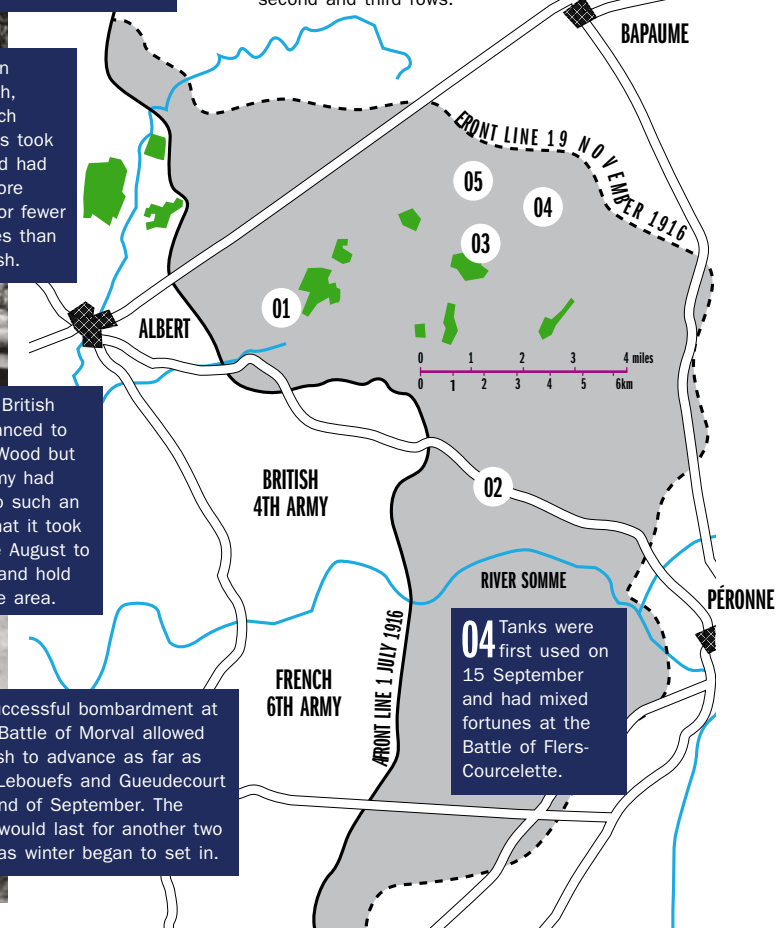
**02** Down south, the French regiments took Curlu and had made more ground for fewer casualties than the British.

**03** The British advanced to Delville Wood but the enemy had dug in to such an extent that it took until late August to capture and hold on to the area.

**05** A successful bombardment at the Battle of Morval allowed the British to advance as far as Morval, Leboueufs and Gueudecourt by the end of September. The Somme would last for another two months as winter began to set in.

## BATTLE OF THE SOMME

Just east of the town of Albert lay a huge network of trenches, and an immense show of strength would be required to break it. Haig's idea was for a creeping barrage that would destroy the first line of trenches and then to rinse and repeat for the second and third rows.



**04** Tanks were first used on 15 September and had mixed fortunes at the Battle of Flers-Courcelette.

## THE SLAUGHTER CONTINUES

On the second day, the troops were again rushed into battle. As food, water and ammunition reached the new front, the 15th Battalion captured 53 prisoners including three officers. The 7th East Lancashire Regiment even managed to capture Heligoland, an area of strong German defences. The 15th Battalion were one of the most successful units from the first few days of the Somme but their tiny two-kilometre advance, the best of any group, had come at a terrible price, losing 18 officers and 610 soldiers. The 16th Battalion hadn't fared much better with 12 officers and 460 soldiers dead on the battlefield.

Elsewhere, the 11th and 12th battalions had missed the first attacks but went into battle on the 2 July, attacking Bernafay Wood and capturing the retreating German soldiers' field guns. The enemy had the last laugh, however, and began shelling the area, killing huge numbers. The battalions managed to hold their line until 8 July when they were withdrawn for a much-needed rest. It must be remembered

that the first few days of the Somme weren't without some gains as Mametz, Fricourt and Montauban were captured on the Thiepval-Morval ridge, but the loss of human life was still excruciating to bear.

One of the reasons so many perished was due to the strictness of the orders. The generals realised that this 'army' was not an expertly drilled force, so made their instructions as detailed as possible. The result was a distinct lack of initiative, so even if the battalions could find a potential way out of the slaughter, they would not try to seek it. Some believe that one of the motives behind the huge artillery bombardment was that both Haig and Rawlinson had doubts about the calibre of the soldiers and wanted to make the assault as easy as possible for their men.

The early days of the Somme did see some success, however. The courage shown by the Volunteer Army had put so much pressure on the German war machine that Chief of the German General Staff Erich Von Falkenhayn was forced to postpone major offensive operations

at Verdun in July, relieving the burden on the battered French troops.

Bazentin Ridge was taken by British forces in the same month and some of the hardest fighting of the whole battle took place at Delville Wood, with Australian and South African troops assisting the overworked Pals Battalions. There were 100,000 German casualties in a fire fight at the village of Ginchy as Kitchener's boys began to come into their own.

## DAWN OF THE TANK

The British infantry was up against it for the first few months of the Somme. The German trenches only sported insignificant scars from the artillery bombardment and the British papers spoke of the horror of corpse after corpse stacking up on the battlefield. A potential antidote to the perilous situation came in September when the Volunteer Army witnessed the first ever tanks on the world's battlefields. 49 tanks were introduced initially, but there were problems from the start as



only about 20 of the machines that eventually reached the front line were battle ready.

The landships, as they were first known, were kept in the greatest secrecy and very few men had trained with them prior to the Somme. Some even believed they were being sent water tanks to quench the infantry's thirst, such was the scarcity of information. The 28-ton Mark I tanks lumbered towards the enemy lines in a slow and steady yet relentless advance. The tanks arrived on the field at 6.20am on 15 September. While the Tommies watched on in awe, inside the behemoths was a frantic scene as the crew battled the heat and noise to keep the momentum of the tracks up and fire off the powerful weaponry. Gunners and loaders struggled to aim as the vibration of the tank was so violent, while the three drivers each needed did battle against a complex system of gearboxes. The Germans were visibly frightened by these mechanical monsters, however, and both Flers and Courcellette fell, with the advancement resulting in small gains of about 2,300 metres across a five kilometre front on 15 September.

Tanks were the great new hope, and eyewitnesses described their ability to flatten walls and demolish barbed wire as a whole new type of warfare, as the British soldiers used the massive machines like bullet sponges. At one point, 400 Germans waved the white flag towards two immobilised tanks – they were that unsure of this alien device with almost unreal firepower. All reports of tanks on the battlefield were censored by the German press, which did not want to report this new threat for fear of lowering morale.

However, as it dawned that these seemingly fearsome machines were unreliable, the Germans stopped surrendering on the spot and began to devise ways of taking them out, minimising their effectiveness. The Mark I's problematic technical issues and the lack of tactics given to the Volunteer Army curtailed their influence. Some tanks got through the German defences and performed their duty admirably, but ultimately the execution was rushed, and every Tommy turned back to their lines and sighed as another Mark I plummeted into the abyss of a wide enemy trench.

## THE ROAD TO WINTER

The gains made on 15 September were the greatest since the Battle of the Somme began. The entire month was the largest loss of life for the German Army during the battle and the Fourth Army managed to capture Morval on 28 September even without any armoured assistance. Thiepval Ridge was also taken and both sides believed it to be the most critical high point of the surrounding area. The Volunteer Army were seemingly becoming accustomed to the battle they were in but









*The Battle of the Somme witnessed the debut of the Mark I tank, which achieved mixed results on the battlefield*

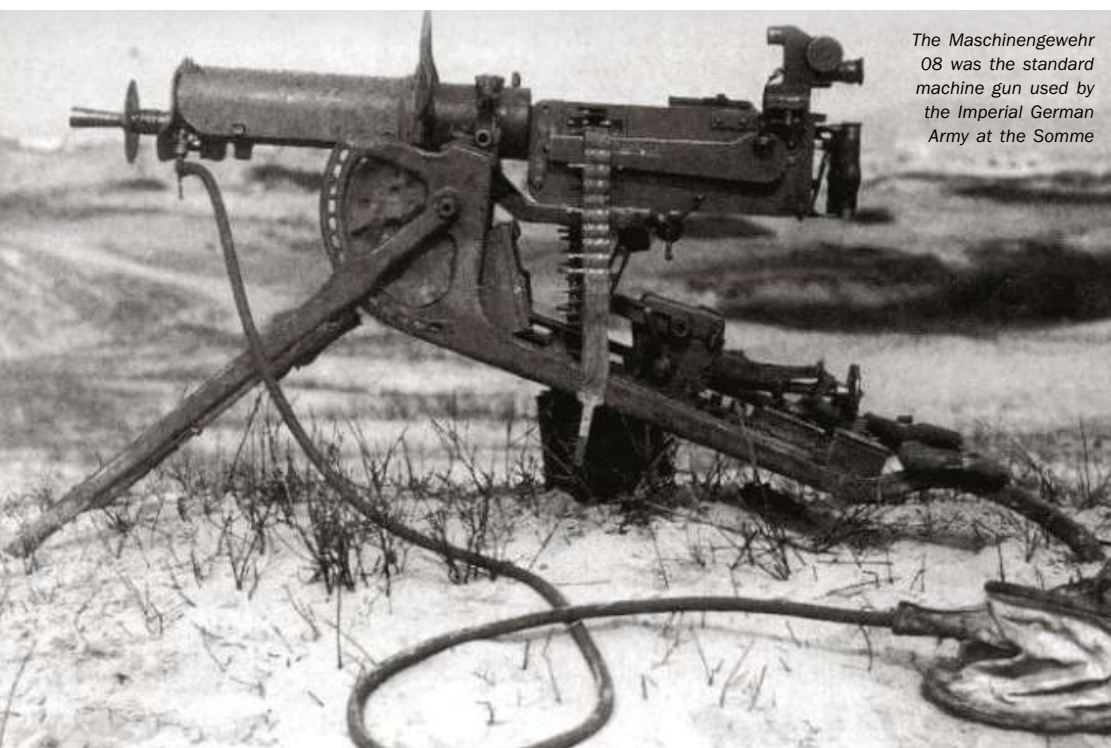


still, only minimal gains were being made and the Germans were happy to utilise a holding campaign. After the occupation of the valuable ridge, Haig was intent on pressing for more strategic gains. As the weather worsened, the Battle of Le Transloy raged on for two full days until the Germans were finally driven from the area. The Somme was turning into a rain-soaked swamp but still the British attacked as winter drew in.

The conditions at Le Transloy fast became unsustainable but fighting was still taking place on the Ancre Heights. The targets for the British battalions were the Schwaben Redoubt and the Stuff Redoubt, German defensive positions that had caused so much pain to the Volunteer Army over the last few months. Both of these key areas were stormed by the courageous troops who fought through defiantly the heavy rain and even heavier enemy fire. As the last month of the Somme dawned, what would be the final few operations were conducted alongside the River Ancre between 13 and 19 November.

The artillery bombardment began at 5.45am, and after it came the infantry, who advanced painfully through swathes of mud. The following seven days of attacks summed up the Somme as a whole – some tactical successes was achieved but with a terrible loss of life.

It was hoped that this late surge could be invaluable in an eventual British and French victory, but in the torrential rain, no major gains were made except for the wounding of a young German corporal in the 6th Bavarian Reserve Division named Adolf Hitler.



*The Maschinengewehr 08 was the standard machine gun used by the Imperial German Army at the Somme*



## THE IRON HARVEST

100 years on, remnants of the Somme still linger. Unexploded artillery shells still litter the Somme battlefield resulting in what is known as the 'Iron Harvest'. Most are buried but are sometimes unearthed by farmers ploughing the fields of the former Western Front. The swampy marshland that appeared towards the end of the battle has made the shells sink deeper into the ground, so more and more are being found every year. These Iron Harvests happen on battlefields all over the world, not just the Somme, and showcase an era of war gone by.





## SOMME VICTORIA CROSS HEROES

A selection of the brave 51 men who won a VC at the Somme

### FREDERICK JEREMIAH EDWARDS

**A fearless Irishman skilled at flushing out enemy positions with grenades**  
In September, the British, now bolstered by tanks, were intent on capturing Thiepval Ridge, a German stronghold located on valuable high ground. Part of the Middlesex Regiment, Edwards showed immense bravery by doing what his officers could not – using grenades to take out a machine-gun nest. The private kept fighting on until 1918 when he was captured by the Germans. He survived the war but was sadly forced to sell his VC in peacetime when he was strapped for cash.



### DAVID JONES

**Driving back the Imperial German Army with no food or water**  
This young sergeant's defining moment came on 3 September 1916 at Guillemont. After witnessing his commanding officer being gunned down by German soldiers, Jones took control of the platoon and managed to capture a key road, which they would go on to hold for two more days – while enduring three waves of brutal German attacks. This heroism earned the Liverpudlian his VC, but he sadly never lived to see it as he was killed in the Battle for Transloy Ridges just a month later.



### DONALD SIMPSON BELL

**The only professional footballer to be awarded a Victoria Cross**  
Donald Simpson Bell enthusiastically answered Kitchener's call, joining the West Yorkshire Regiment in November 1914. He arrived on the Somme shortly after returning from his honeymoon, and on 5 July, he was tasked with assaulting enemy lines. Under heavy fire from a German machine gun, he managed to take it out by launching an expertly placed grenade. He was sadly killed five days later, but his heroism was not forgotten and the area is now known as 'Bell's Redoubt' after him.



### JAMES YOULL TURNBULL

**The tough Glaswegian who single-handedly defended a trench**  
A member of the highland light Infantry, James Turnbull enlisted in the Lanarkshire Rifle Volunteers prior to the outbreak of the First World War. He was one of the brave men who ventured over the top when the bombardment ended on 1 July and, despite his whole squad being taken down, he managed to make his objective. Holding his position, he hopped on enemy machine guns and threw back German grenades. However, the brave Scotsman was the victim of a German sniper later that day.



### GABRIEL GEORGE COURY

**A brave Liverpudlian who saved one of his own while putting his life in the balance**  
By 8 August 1916, the British were on the advance through the village of Guillemont. Second Lieutenant Gabriel George Coury of the South Lancashire Regiment was under orders to construct a new communication trench. The back-breaking task was completed but men were still being lost. At one point, Coury charged into full view of the enemy to save an injured officer. Putting his life in danger, he leapt back into the trench with his comrade while being strafed by German machine-gun fire.



A German soldier sports a Stahlhelm, the replacement for the spiked Pickelhaube that came into use in 1916

## AFTERMATH: THE LOST GENERATION

The four and a half month-long battle ended as the downpours turned into freezing sleet. The British forces had suffered a total of 420,000 casualties. The Volunteer Army had been through hell, seizing only a strip of territory that was 32 kilometres long and 10 kilometres deep. After the Battle of the Somme, optimistic patriotism had melted away and men were less willing to sign up, and conscription took centre stage as a more effective means of army recruitment.

The Pals Battalions were a two-year experiment that was obliterated at the Battle of the Somme, but Kitchener's New Army was no longer a group of individuals – it was a well-drilled and experienced professional force. The Somme wasn't all tactical and strategic oversights. Out of the trenches emerged a better land army with a hardened resolve that would take the fight to the Central Powers in subsequent conflicts at Cambrai and Arras and once again at the Somme in 1918.

The battle was a major defeat for the Imperial German Army and halted the Germans at Verdun. The Germans hadn't anticipated that the British would fight this hard and their aim of 'bleeding France white'

was stalled as they withdrew back to the Hindenburg Line.

The heroism and stamina of Kitchener's men had shone through and Britain's dogged and even blind determination to succeed had finally, and only just, won out in this bloody battle of attrition. The Somme was a strategic success but ultimately a pyrrhic victory, and the graveyards of the Pals Battalions resulted in a 'lost generation'. The men would never have a victory parade, and instead lay dead in the mud of northern France. It wasn't just British men who had suffered though. 200,000 Frenchmen lay with them, their job done in helping their countrymen hold on at Verdun. Nearly 500,000 Germans were also killed at the Somme, a death toll the Central Powers would never quite recover from. The courage and tenacity had tipped the war in the Triple Entente's favour and sent shockwaves to the Kaiser as he realised just how great the British mettle and resolve could be. In two years, the war was over as Germany resorted to unrestricted submarine warfare and coerced the USA into the war. Germany would be on the back foot for the remainder of the war after the Volunteer Army's heroics at the Somme.



# 1917

## 100 THE BATTLE OF VIMY RIDGE

After years of failed efforts, this infamously tricky position finally fell to Canadian forces, giving birth to a national legend

## 106 THE BATTLE OF PASSCHENDAELE

Over a century ago, the Ypres Salient was consumed by a battle that became a byword for the futility of industrialised warfare

## 112 THE BATTLE OF CAMBRAI

When the British Army deployed tanks to change the pace of the First World War, it changed the face of it instead

## 120 THE BATTLE OF JERUSALEM

During a campaign that lasted nearly a year, British and Arab forces defeated the Ottoman Turks and entered the ancient city of Jerusalem







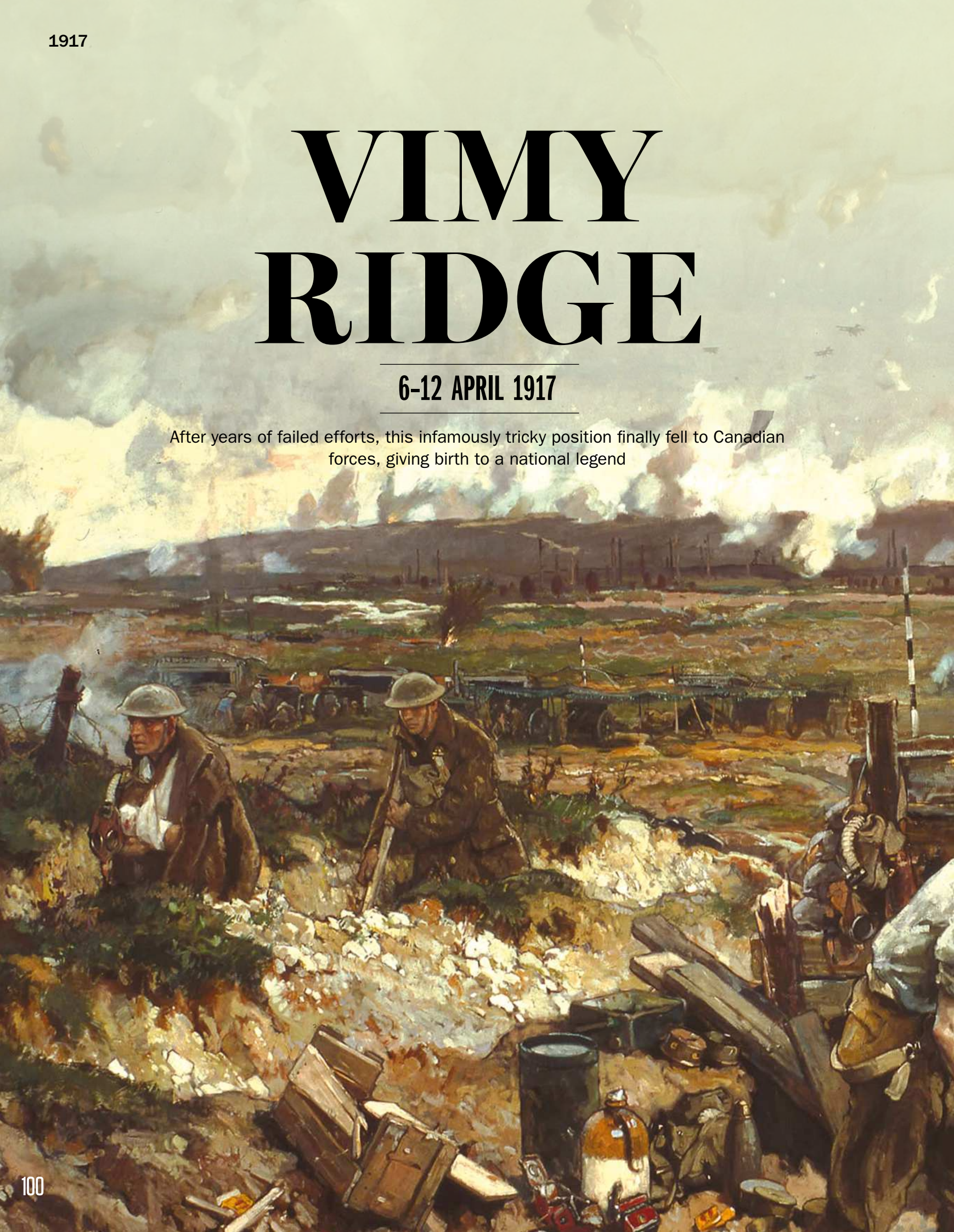


1917

# VIMY RIDGE

6-12 APRIL 1917

After years of failed efforts, this infamously tricky position finally fell to Canadian forces, giving birth to a national legend





**E**aster Monday, Arras, north-east France, 9 April 1917. After months of relative quiet during the cold winter of 1916-17, the British Army announced the return to the offensive with an artillery bombardment of nearly 2.7 million shells, focused on an area only 24 kilometres long. The operation was intended to be a feint, nothing more. Its objective was to pull German defences away from the river Aisne where the real fight, the Nivelle Offensive, would begin a week later.

British commanders, right up to Douglas Haig, commander-in-chief of the British army and newly minted field marshal, could not have known the import that this battle would have for generations to come. At the time it was just another medium-sized campaign, an operation in support of the still larger and dominant French army. Haig himself was downright annoyed at having to fight battles like Arras at all. A year earlier he had been asked by Joseph Joffre to carry out a series of small battles to hold German reserves on the British front and

wear down German units before the battle of the Somme. At the time he wrote in his diary that, "... [the French] wished the British to commence attacking in end of April [1916] with the object of, they said, 'wearing out' the German reserves (a 'bataille d'usure' as they are pleased to call it) – while they intend to do nothing until the enemy's reserves had disappeared!"

Now in April 1917, Haig and the British Army once again found themselves launching small-to-medium operations not even in support of their French ally, but merely as a prelude to the French attack. Arras would be different, however; at least at the start. Unlike so many other battles of its size and dubious importance, the clash would not be forgotten by later generations. Instead, it would be immortalised forever as the birthplace of a nation, thanks to the stunning advance of the Canadian Corps and their successful capture of one of the most daunting pieces of high ground on the Front: Vimy Ridge.

The path to the capture of Vimy Ridge was a long one. Twice in 1915 the best infantry and artillery

in the French army struggled across the farmland and through the small villages that lead up there and they made three attempts to actually capture the ridge itself. One, on 9 May 1915, had come tantalisingly close to success. The Moroccan Division stormed the top of Vimy Ridge and desperately fought the German defenders there at close quarters for three whole days. Nevertheless, the attack failed.

Even if the French had not taken Vimy Ridge, they had succeeded in moving the line ever closer to its base, seeing it loom nearer and nearer, almost within reach. By the time the Canadians found themselves huddled in their jumping-off positions early on the morning of 9 April 1917, a great deal of work had been done to prepare the ground for their assault. They had dug 12 long tunnels to shelter the men as they waited for the attack. The longest of these was 1,883 yards long and altogether, the tunnels could shelter 25,000 men. The positions ensured that the men would be protected against German counter bombardment as they marched

**"IT WOULD BE IMMORTALISED FOREVER AS THE BIRTHPLACE OF A NATION, THANKS TO THE STUNNING ADVANCE OF THE CANADIAN CORPS AND THEIR SUCCESSFUL CAPTURE OF ONE OF THE MOST DAUNTING PIECES OF HIGH GROUND ON THE WESTERN FRONT"**



*The Battle of Vimy Ridge by Richard Jack c.1918, from the Canadian War Museum*



**“BY 1.18PM, THE CANADIANS HAD DONE IT. VIMY RIDGE WAS IN THEIR HANDS AFTER AN ADVANCE OF 3.7 KILOMETRES AND AT A COST OF 11,000 CASUALTIES”**

*29th Infantry Battalion  
advancing over No Man's Land  
through the German barbed  
wire and heavy fire during the  
battle of Vimy Ridge*



to their jumping-off positions, and significantly reduced the amount of open ground they would have to cover before closing with the German defenders and storming their trenches. The time was ripe, the men were ready and everything had been planned.

At 5.30am on the day of the attack, British and Canadian forces surged over the top and towards their varied objectives. The weather was appalling – a heavy snowstorm lumbered over north-east France and had not let up by the time the attack went in. The weather made conditions miserable, but also severely disoriented the Germans who could not be sure when the attack would come, just as had been the case in May 1915 when heavy rains had granted surprise to the Moroccan Division and Barbot's 77th.

At 5.45am, British and Canadian guns inundated German artillery batteries with dense clouds of poison gas. The tactic invented by the French at Artois two years earlier was used to deadly effect on 9 April 1917. Unlike the French in 1915, however, the British and Canadians had developed highly sophisticated means of spotting and ranging enemy batteries, through sound ranging and flash spotting. These techniques relied on artillery observers in trenches keeping track of the sound of enemy guns and any muzzle-flares they saw. Through sophisticated deduction and mathematical calculation, this information could be used to eventually pinpoint the location of enemy batteries.

The work of observers and mathematicians was facilitated by artillery action intended to keep enemy batteries in place. Rather than immediately inundate newly discovered enemy batteries, the positions were catalogued, shared with other friendly batteries and then subjected to a fire regime intended above all else to keep the enemy battery stationary and accounted for. A known battery could be taken out on the day of the attack.

Tightly packed enemy batteries were especially vulnerable to neutralisation by poison gas, making them easy to silence when it mattered most.

So, instead of engaging batteries directly in the early days of April 1917, British and Canadian batteries focused more so on the German road network, making it more difficult for the batteries to be resupplied, and even more difficult for them to relocate.

As the battle neared, the British and Canadian artillery plan shifted and began to focus on observation posts, telephone exchanges, supply dumps and enemy artillery headquarters. By 1917, the Entente powers had learned that there were many ways to neutralise enemy artillery. They could be inundated with shrapnel, high explosives or poison gas. They could also be cut off from their communications network (and thus unable to respond to any Entente attack), or they could simply be cut off from resupply and slowly starved of ammunition. As long as the guns could be silenced, it hardly mattered.

Thanks to the tireless work of well-trained artillerymen, pilots and staff officers, British and Canadian gunners knew the precise locations of 86 per cent of the German batteries before 9 April (a total of 212 German guns). Thanks to this knowledge, the Entente artillery effectively silenced almost the entirety of the German artillery protecting Vimy Ridge before 6am on 9 April 1917. This was especially impressive given the aerial dominance of German forces in spring 1917. Superior training and the introduction of the new Albatross D.II and D.III fighter aircraft had given the Germans a serious advantage in the air. This advantage was amplified by the fact that the Royal Flying Corps, under Hugh Trenchard, had committed

to an aggressive posture of scouting, strafing and bombing positions under German airspace.

As a result, the German fighters could operate over their own territory, meaning any forced landings or survived crashes saw German pilots recovered by their own infantry. British pilots who went down and survived became prisoners. The poor loiter time of aircraft of the period also meant that British squadrons were frequently forced to disengage and begin the flight home when petrol ran low. British pilots would have no choice but to head back to British lines, pursued by hungry German pilots who did not have the same fuel constraints, operating, as they were, closer to their own airfields.

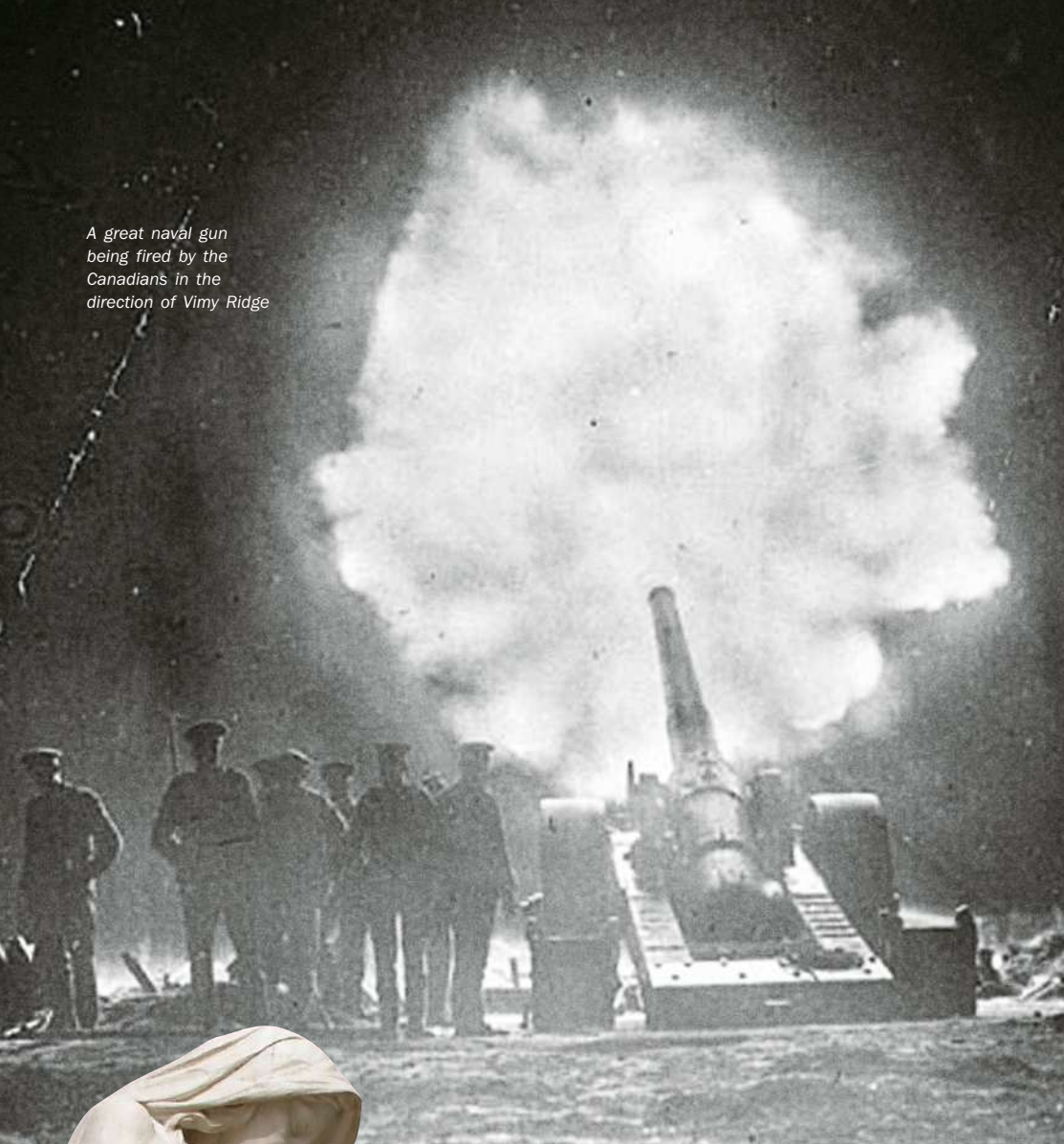
Fortunately for Canadian infantrymen, the scientific evolution of range-finding in the British army had made aerial reconnaissance less important than it had been in discovering enemy batteries in the past. The detailed knowledge of enemy battery positions earned by the careful work of British army artillerymen, plus the support of 337 heavy guns trained on an area only six kilometres wide, meant that British and Canadian

*Marching to the front, alongside a British  
Mark IV tank, during the Battle of Arras*





A great naval gun being fired by the Canadians in the direction of Vimy Ridge



batteries could swamp their German counterparts with neutralising fire. Most of the German batteries were neutralised during the critical initial phase of the battle, shielding the Canadian Corps from the withering artillery fire that had cut down the three previous French attempts to capture Vimy.

As the British and Canadians surged out of their forward positions, they advanced behind one of the most sophisticated artillery barrages ever fired during the war on the Western Front. In some sectors, smoke shells were added to the rolling barrage to help obscure the vision of German defenders. The 9th (Scottish) Division did this, even though it was technically against official guidelines, and it helped them make one of the most stunning advances of the war: 5.6 kilometres, the longest advance by any division on the Western Front.

The rolling barrages across the front were carefully thought out, responsive and tailored to the needs and peculiarities of each individual part of the front. One need in particular was neutralising German machine-gunners who had developed new tactical approaches during the winter of 1916-17.

Instead of massing in forward positions, many German machine gun crews were now sited a few hundred metres back from the frontline. This removed them from the most intensely bombarded sections of their defensive zone and enabled them to open fire once the Entente forces had gone over the top, chewing significant holes in any advance. They could do so because being sited further back meant that the rolling barrage would take more time to reach them, giving the German crews more time to emerge from their dugouts and begin firing.

The British and Canadian forces responded to this tactical development by increasing the depth of the rolling barrage, and also mixing in a wider range of artillery (thus increasing the number of guns that could be brought to bear). While the British and Canadian response did not silence German machine guns entirely, they went a long way to reducing their efficacy in the critical opening minutes of the battle.

By 1.18pm, the Canadians had done it. Vimy Ridge was in their hands after an advance of 3.7 kilometres and at the cost of 11,000 casualties. In places the Canadians had progressed so far, and so quickly, they actually captured German artillery, turned the guns around, and used them to fire on disorganised German defenders (a feat that the Canadians had been expressly trained to do in the build-up to the attack).

The German defences that the Canadians overran were in a pitiful state – the carefully laid out German trench lines had almost everywhere been completely flattened. Instead of trenches, German defenders were left defending a series of unconnected, or loosely connected, shell holes. German dugouts had been caved in, making these normally safe refuges increasingly dangerous. This forced German defenders above ground, where they were even more susceptible to the awesome firepower brought to bear against them.



**LEFT** 'Canada bereft'. The embodiment of Canada weeps for her fallen soldiers, overlooking the Doai plains

The Canadian memorial at Vimy Ridge. One of the most impressive war memorials anywhere in the world



1917



*Squads of machine gunners operate from shell-craters in support of the infantry on the plateau above the ridge*

*Canadians breaking through German barbed wire entanglements in the taking of Vimy Ridge, April 1917*



*Some of the trenches at Vimy, which have been preserved*

The position the German defenders found themselves in was extremely fraught, to say the least. Nevertheless, they managed to make a bad position even worse for themselves through mismanagement and shockingly poor command decisions in the face of overwhelmingly superior British and Canadian firepower.

Opposite the Canadians, Sixth Army held the German defences under the command of General Ludwig von Falkenhausen, who had been in the Arras sector since September 1916. His previous experience had mostly been in Lorraine commanding a relatively quiet sector for most of the war. He spent most of 1916 leading the coastal batteries at Hamburg and then sitting the quiet sector of Arras while the battles of the Somme and Verdun raged to his south. Perhaps because of his lack of experience he failed to understand the changing character of warfare on the Western Front. Most notably, he did not implement the careful defence-in-depth posture advocated by General Erich von Ludendorff, who, along with Paul von Hindenburg, was in command of the formidable German Army.

Ludendorff understood that the Germans were at a severe manpower disadvantage to their enemies on the Western Front. Rather than place all of his men in forward trenches to be ground out by Entente artillery, surrounded by advancing Entente infantry practicing ever-increasingly sophisticated infantry tactics, he imagined a system where the Germans would instead create a vast, elastic defensible zone.

Only a bare minimum of defenders would be placed in forward positions to limit the number of casualties that could be sustained in the opening phase of the battle. Entente forces were to be allowed to penetrate this thin outer crust and advance a kilometre or more to the real line of German defence. Here, well-organised and well-rested German defenders, largely spared from the worst of the Entente's artillery preparation, would decisively defeat the tired and disorganised Entente troops as they came into range.

The elastic defence-in-depth was a brilliant idea that very rarely worked as intended in the field; it was simply too complicated and required immense levels of training and morale at all levels of the army. Nevertheless, Falkenhausen's plan to place the bulk of his forces on the crest of Vimy Ridge, completely out of keeping with the new German defensive plans, was totally inappropriate. He had massed his men at the heaviest point of British and Canadian artillery fire, the exact opposite of what Ludendorff's new tactics were designed to achieve.

The Canadians had been carefully trained in modern combined-arms tactics and were supported by modern artillery, tanks, aircraft and an unusually high concentration of machine guns. The Canadian brigades had 80 guns each, and every platoon had a section of Lewis guns (light, portable machine guns) to provide close fire-support to the riflemen as they advanced.

Through the bitterly cold winter, the Canadians had practiced taking Vimy Ridge. They studied detailed models of the terrain and enemy positions.

They rehearsed the battle again and again. As a result, even fighting through a bitter snowstorm, surrounded by the din of battle, bullets and shells firing in every direction, the men of the Canadian Corps did not falter, get lost or head in the wrong direction. This intense and careful training helped immensely on the day.

In addition to rehearsing specifically for Vimy, the Canadians benefitted from changes to British infantry doctrine that came about as a result of their experience during the Battle of the Somme. In this sense, Canadians' experience was not entirely different to that of the French two years earlier. In May 1915, the French attacked with a new doctrine that gave them a temporary tactical advantage over the Germans. Issued in April 1915, the doctrine, 'But et conditions d'une action offensive d'ensemble (Note 5779)' laid out the foundations of trench warfare for the rest of the war, such as the importance of a rolling barrage, proscriptions for how to best neutralise enemy defences with artillery and the introduction of what we would now call 'infiltration tactics', a system of training and organising waves of attacking infantry to maximise and maintain their forward momentum.

In April 1917, the Canadians benefitted from their own doctrinal overhaul, SS 143 Instructions for the Offensive Training of Platoons for Offensive Action 1917. Initially released in February 1917, SS 143 marked a major turning point for the doctrine and tactics of the British and Commonwealth forces in WWI. It was a refinement and a distillation of all the lessons that British forces had learned





Canadian soldiers sit in a devastated German gun emplacement on the crest of Vimy Ridge

during 1916 as they struggled and staggered through the difficult Somme offensive.

In many ways, SS 143 echoed the proscriptions of Note 5779, albeit in substantially more detail and with a great deal more sophistication. As with Note 5779, SS 143 placed an emphasis on the importance of having assault troops bypass enemy strong points, leaving them to be dealt with by 'moppers up'. These troops came up in the secondary waves of infantry, specially armed with knives, extra grenades and revolvers, and trained in the deadly business of close-combat fighting in the rat warren of enemy trenches that assault troops had already rolled over in the initial waves.

SS 143 goes much deeper, however, in splitting up platoons into small, semi-autonomous squads of six to ten men that were specially trained and armed with either Lewis guns, rifle-grenades or other specialist weaponry. Rather than a mass of undifferentiated infantrymen, the armed forces imagined by SS 143 were composed overwhelmingly of specialists occupying a dizzying array overlapping skill sets and utilities working together in a complex orchestra.

They worked together to maximise firepower, maintain forward momentum and rely on skill, training and expertise for success, rather than relying on just the sheer weight of steel and flesh that the British and Commonwealth forces could throw at the enemy. The battle of Arras, and the capture of Vimy Ridge, was not just a critical moment in the birth of the Canadian nation, it was also a milestone on the path to creating

## **“EVEN FIGHTING THROUGH A BITTER SNOWSTORM, SURROUNDED BY THE DIN OF BATTLE, BULLETS AND SHELLS FIRING IN EVERY DIRECTION, THE MEN OF THE CANADIAN CORPS DID NOT FALTER”**

fully modern, professional, differentiated infantry fighting forces.

The attempts made by the Entente to capture Vimy Ridge in 1915 and 1917 offer an interesting and cogent parallel to the war as a whole. The Entente, as usual, had the strategic imperative to attack and repel the German defenders from key pieces of high ground. This was the basic tactical paradigm up and down the front throughout the war; a result of the German retreat after the first Battle of the Marne in 1914 (the Germans had the luxury of choosing where to stop their retreat, and chose to maintain every key piece of high ground possible).

When thinking about WWI, people immediately think of the trenches, mud, massed artillery fire and machine guns. These were all, of course, ubiquitous and constituted the principal obstacles that the Entente had to overcome if they were going to successfully attack the Germans and drive them from occupied France and Belgium.

People often forget, however, that it was not simply a matter of attacking over flat land into well-organised German trench networks. The German terrain dominance was a significant advantage enjoyed for most of the war in all of the critical sectors (Artois, Ypres, Champagne, the Aisne, etc).

It drastically reduced their need to rely on aerial reconnaissance to observe artillery fire, gave them easy observation over Allied lines (so they could generally spot troop build-ups and the frenetic trench digging that signalled an up-coming attack), and also shielded their own trenches from Entente observation in turn. It posed a significant challenge that the Entente could only eventually master through a mixture of excellent aerial observation and liaison and the development of novel methods of tracking enemy movements and deployments (such as sound-ranging and flash-spotting).

Both 1915 and 1917 also point to a deeper, systemic reality of the fighting on the Western Front. No matter how skilled, how well-trained and how tactically fine-tuned a force was, any advantage it might gain would only be temporary. Both 9 May 1915 and 9 April 1917 saw stunning advances by the 77th and Moroccan divisions, and later by the Canadian Corps and the 9th (Scottish) division. Their success was breathtaking but short-lived. Both Second Artois and Arras degenerated into long, attritional slugging matches whose impetus died down almost as quickly as it seemed to rise up. There was no silver bullet that could give any formation a permanent tactical advantage.



# PASSCHENDAELE

31 JULY – 10 NOVEMBER 1917

100 years ago the Ypres Salient was consumed by a battle that became a byword for the futility of industrialised warfare

In August 1917, a German artilleryman called Gerhard Gurtler wrote a letter home. Even though he was not in the front line, he had been unable to escape the thunderous apocalypse that had consumed the salient around Ypres, “Darkness alternates with light as bright as day. The earth trembles and shakes like a jelly... And those men who are still in the front line hear nothing but the drum-fire, the groaning of wounded comrades, the screaming of fallen horses, the wild beating of their own hearts, hour after hour, night after night. Even during the short respite granted them, their exhausted brains are haunted in the weird stillness by recollections of unlimited suffering. They have no way of escape, nothing is left to them but ghastly memories and resigned anticipation. The battlefield is nothing really but one vast cemetery.”

Before the war, Gurtler had been a theology student at Breslau. Four days after writing this vivid letter, however, he was killed. Gurtler's despair and subsequent death was replicated hundreds of thousands of times over in the bloody

fields of Flanders during a gruelling, prolonged battle that would come to be known by just one Belgian village: Passchendaele.

Otherwise known as the ‘Third Battle of Ypres’, Passchendaele has come to symbolise the futility of warfare on the Western Front during WWI. There had been disasters before, with the battles of the Somme and Verdun being the most obvious examples, but Passchendaele only reinforced the horrendous nature that the war had developed. From an Allied perspective, the idealism of 1914 had long since disappeared along with hundreds of thousands of soldiers on both sides. All that was left was bloodshed, a grim determination to succeed and, above all, mud.

## A WELL-INTENTIONED PLAN

The battle was projected from the Flanders town of Ypres, which had already been the epicentre of two previous battles, in 1914 and 1915. The bulge in the British lines around Ypres spread the battlefield across miles of the Belgian countryside and the Allied offensive, planned by the British Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, in 1917, was

intended to be yet another decisive breakthrough that would bring the war to a swift conclusion.

Haig had long wanted a British offensive in Flanders to break the deadlock on the Western Front and in the summer of 1917 the need for a swift victory was urgent.

Russia had been engulfed by revolution since February that year, and the possibility of its withdrawal from the war meant that dozens of German Army divisions could be redeployed from the Eastern Front to the west. Additionally, unrestricted U-boat submarine warfare was severely disrupting Allied shipping lanes and, while the United States had declared war on Germany on 2 April, American troops had not yet arrived on the Western Front in sufficient numbers to make a decisive difference.

It was therefore left to the weary soldiers of Britain, the Commonwealth, France and Belgium to continue the fight for the time being. Haig obtained permission from a sceptical David Lloyd George, British prime minister, to launch his offensive in the Ypres Salient in the hope that it might lead to the seizure of the U-boat bases at Blankenberge and Ostend.





**“THEY HAVE NO WAY OF ESCAPE,  
NOTHING IS LEFT TO THEM BUT GHASTLY  
MEMORIES AND RESIGNED ANTICIPATION.  
THE BATTLEFIELD IS NOTHING REALLY BUT  
ONE VAST CEMETERY”**

*Australian soldiers of the 10th Field Artillery Brigade walk along duckboards through the remains of Chateau Wood, near Hooze in the Ypres Salient, on 29 October 1917. This iconic image was captured by Frank Hurley, the official photographer for the Australian Imperial Force (AIF). Hurley had only recently returned from the Antarctic, where he had been a prominent member of Sir Ernest Shackleton's famous Imperial Trans-Antarctic 'Endurance' Expedition*



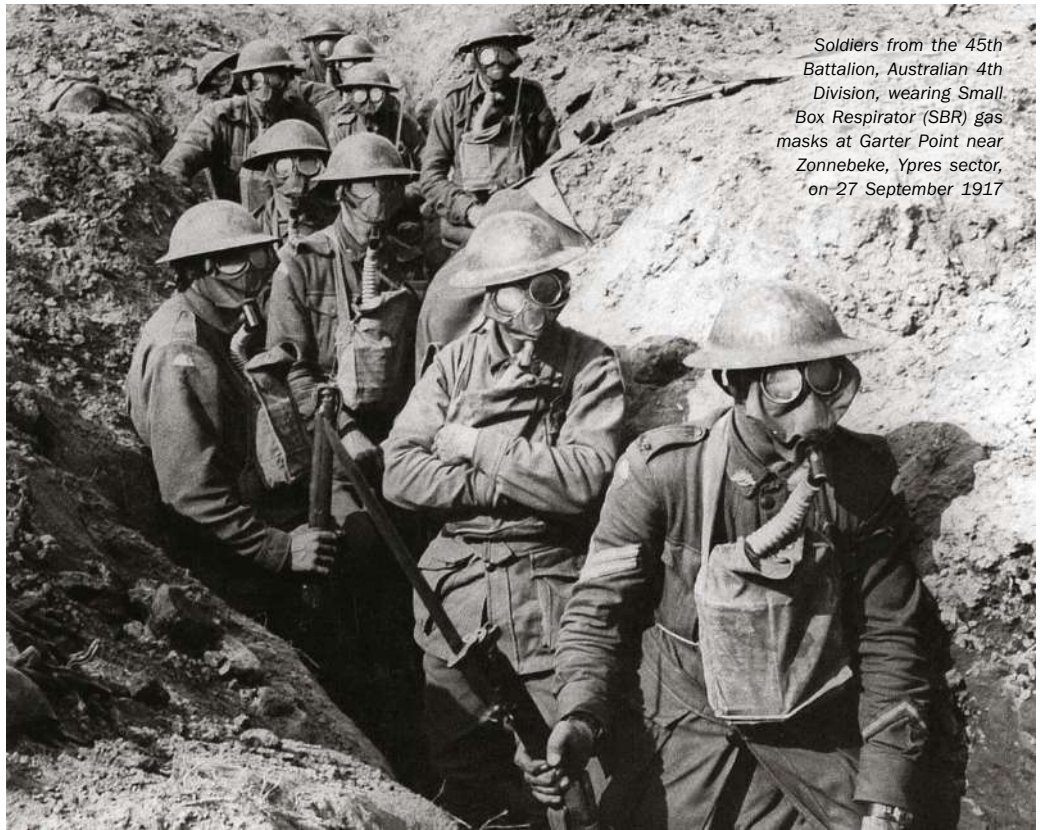
A smaller, but successful, British attack using huge mines at Messines Ridge in June had encouraged Haig to believe that the German Army was at breaking point, but events that followed would prove otherwise.

## BOMBARDMENTS AND MUD

In many ways, the British-led offensive was hindered by geography. The plain on the Ypres Salient is extremely flat, which made stealthy preparations impossible. Instead, a preliminary artillery bombardment was launched that lasted for 15 days and delivered four million shells fired from 3,000 guns. Despite the intense noise and explosions, the bombardment only alerted the Germans that an attack was imminent. As a result, they heavily fortified their positions – just as they had done at the Somme the previous year.

The Allied infantry attack began on 31 July and was led by the British Fifth Army, commanded by General Sir Hubert Gough, and flanked by supporting British and French formations. The term 'British' did not just refer to soldiers from the United Kingdom, but also its empire, with Imperial troops including large numbers from Canada, Australia, India, New Zealand, South Africa as well as Newfoundland.

Nevertheless, this global force was stumbling into chaos. The bombardment had failed to destroy the German positions and the constant shelling had churned the clay soil and smashed the drainage systems. Although the left flank



Soldiers from the 45th Battalion, Australian 4th Division, wearing Small Box Respirator (SBR) gas masks at Garter Point near Zonnebeke, Ypres sector, on 27 September 1917

**“DESPITE THE INTENSE NOISE AND EXPLOSIONS, THE BOMBARDMENT ONLY ALERTED THE GERMANS THAT AN ATTACK WAS IMMINENT”**

## TRENCH RAILWAYS

The soldiers at Ypres were ably served by a sophisticated system of frontline light railways that provided continuous supplies and saved lives

Railways were the principal means of long-distance transportation on land during WWI and it was no coincidence that the Western Front stabilised between two trunk railways: the German-controlled line from Flanders to the Ardennes and the Allied lines from the Channel ports via Amiens, Paris and Lorraine. Huge armies could consequently be supplied all year round, but railways were also crucial to offensive preparations on the front line.

Between 1915-17, both sides used the static conditions to build light narrow-gauge railways to convey ammunition and building materials beyond the standard-gauge lines up to the front. These light railways were more effective for transporting supplies than motor lorries (that broke up ground with their tyres) or mules and men (because of their low carrying capacity). The Germans laid 'Feldbahns' (field railways) when advancing through enemy territory, while the Allies made effective use of the established

French Decauville light railways and the British (and Commonwealth) War Department Light Railways (WDLR).

At Passchendaele, the WDLR proved its value, particularly in the muddy conditions that hindered other means of transportation. Vast quantities of ammunition and batteries of field guns were hauled to their required destinations but the railways could also save lives. The wounded could be taken by train to hospitals miles behind the front line and the WDLR had control posts along the tracks, which acted as dressing stations for the walking wounded.

In one notable instance, at Passchendaele in October 1917, the 5th New Zealand Light Railway Company evacuated more than 3,000 wounded soldiers in a single night. The railwaymen later received letters of appreciation stating that “the lives of a great number of men had been saved by the light railway”.



Soldiers oversee the transfer of ammunition from a broad gauge train

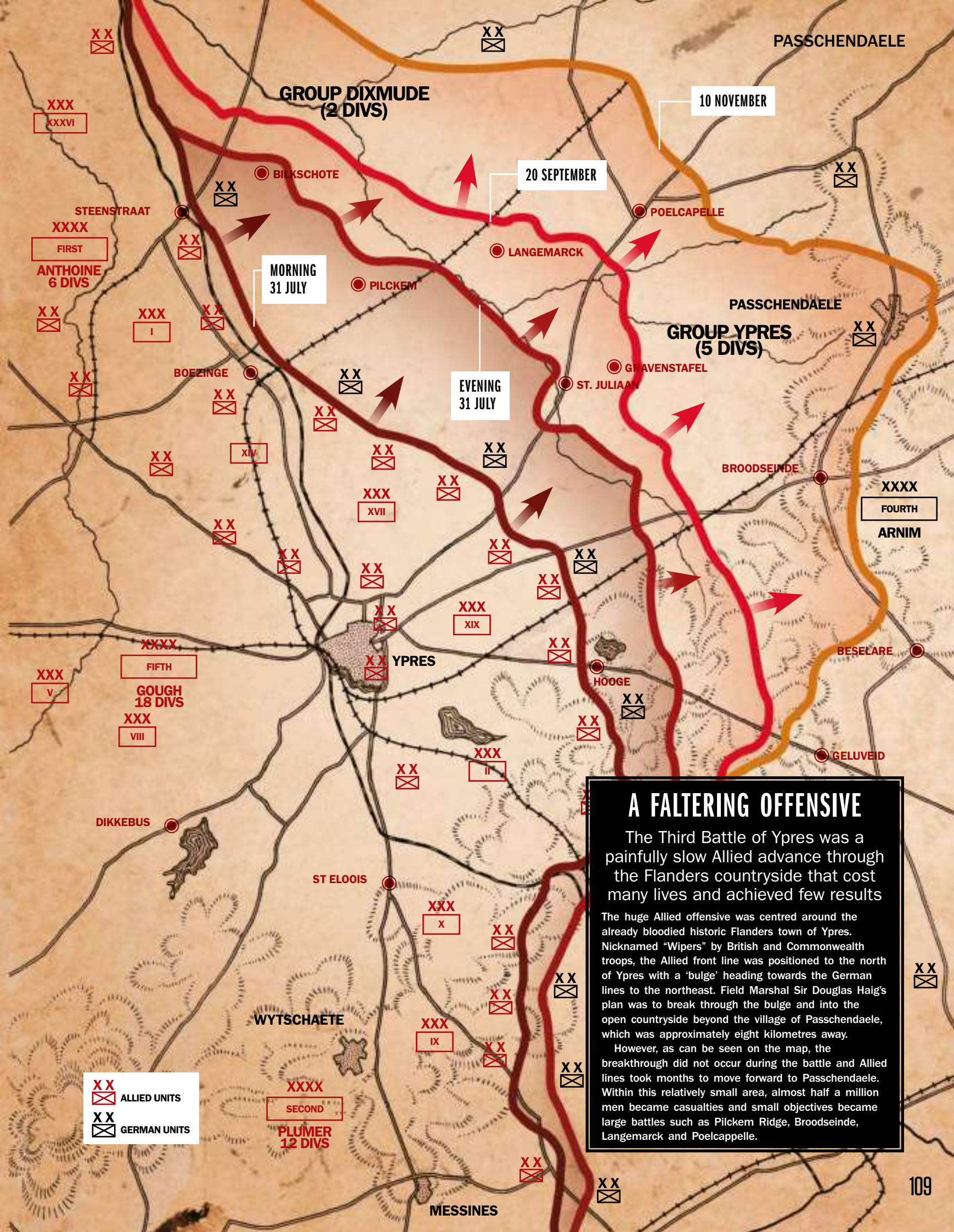


A ballast train of the Australian 17th Light Railway Operating Company, October 1917



British soldiers laying a light railway line near Boesinghe, Belgium, three days before the Third Battle of Ypres began





PASSCHENDAELE

GROUP DIXMUDE  
(2 DIVS)

10 NOVEMBER

20 SEPTEMBER

MORNING  
31 JULY

EVENING  
31 JULY

PASSCHENDAELE  
GROUP YPRES  
(5 DIVS)

XXXX  
FOURTH  
ARNIM

## A FALTERING OFFENSIVE

The Third Battle of Ypres was a painfully slow Allied advance through the Flanders countryside that cost many lives and achieved few results

The huge Allied offensive was centred around the already bloodied historic Flanders town of Ypres. Nicknamed "Wipers" by British and Commonwealth troops, the Allied front line was positioned to the north of Ypres with a 'bulge' heading towards the German lines to the northeast. Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig's plan was to break through the bulge and into the open countryside beyond the village of Passchendaele, which was approximately eight kilometres away.

However, as can be seen on the map, the breakthrough did not occur during the battle and Allied lines took months to move forward to Passchendaele. Within this relatively small area, almost half a million men became casualties and small objectives became large battles such as Pilckem Ridge, Broodseinde, Langemarck and Poelcappelle.

XX  
XX  
XX  
ALLIED UNITS  
XX  
XX  
XX  
GERMAN UNITS

XXXX  
SECOND  
PLUMER  
12 DIVS

XXX  
IX

MESSINES



of the Allied attack achieved its objectives, the right flank completely failed, largely due to the Germans' in-depth defences. Commanded by Erich Ludendorff and Crown Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria, the German defences did not just include heavily fortified positions, but also a deceptive, lightly held front line that was backed by powerful counterattack divisions.

The determined German defenders were also supported by the worst rainfall in Flanders for 30 years. The soil turned into a quagmire with the thick mud initially clogging up rifles and immobilising tanks, but it eventually became so deep that it was just as deadly an enemy to the Allies as the Germans were. Edwin Vaughan of the 8th Warwickshire Regiment described how, "Men with serious wounds... crawled for safety into new shell holes, and now the water was rising about them and, powerless to move, they were slowly drowning." Indeed, the mud of 1917 would claim the lives of countless men and horses during the Third Battle of Ypres.

## LIMITED SUCCESSES

After small, initial gains, the Allies found themselves literally bogged down in the low-lying terrain that had now been rendered virtually impassable by the bombardment and heavy rain. The attack resumed on 16 August, but with little effect and the stalemate continued for another month until an improvement in the weather came in September. By now, Gough had been replaced in direct command by General Sir Herbert Plumer. Under his leadership, the Allies achieved some limited successes using "bite and hold" tactics, with the infantry making small-scale advances and never outrunning their artillery support.

Consequently, there were Allied victories at the battles of Menin Road Ridge (20-26 September), Polygon Wood (26-27 September) and Broodseinde (4 October). These successes enabled the Allies to establish possession of the ridge east of Ypres, but further attacks failed to make much progress. This was largely thanks to Haig insisting on continuing the offensive against Passchendaele Ridge instead of halting, declaring a victory and taking stock of the situation. Haig told one of his subordinates, "The enemy is faltering... a good decisive blow might lead to decisive results."

It was not to be and Haig's stubborn optimism was not shared by the largely Anzac and Canadian troops who carried out the final stages of the offensive. These men floundered in endless mud as the weather worsened yet again, while fresh German reserves arrived, well supplied with mustard gas. Eventually, on 6 November 1917, the little village of Passchendaele was captured by British and Canadian troops and Haig used its capture to call off the offensive and claim a 'success' by 10 November.

## THE PILLBOX: SCOURGE OF THE ALLIED OFFENSIVE

Hundreds of these squat concrete forts significantly added to the modern nightmare of Passchendaele



*A German pillbox at Bullecourt, France, 1917. Many of the pillboxes at Passchendaele would have been of a similar construction*



*A German pillbox steel frame discovered at Broodseinde, in October 1917. This would have supported a relatively small fortification*



*German soldiers shot while trying to escape from a pillbox near Zonnebeke. Such was the pillbox's destructive power on Allied infantry that garrisons were often shown little mercy*

A key feature of the battlefield on the Ypres Salient in 1917 was the German pillbox. Constructed of concrete, reinforced with steel and with roofs and walls that were several feet thick, these miniature field fortifications wreaked havoc upon advancing Allied soldiers.

With the increasing firepower of British artillery, the Germans had begun building concrete fortifications during late 1916-early 1917, which enabled front line troops to survive massive bombardments and then fight from them. The Germans gave these fortifications the functional name of 'Mannschafts Eisenbeton Unterstände' (Reinforced Concrete Shelters for Troops), but British and Commonwealth soldiers soon nicknamed them 'pillboxes'.

The pillbox's primary role was to shelter troops from bombardments and many were deliberately covered in debris on the roofs and against the walls to break up the structure's silhouette. They varied in size and could house as little as six men, but they could also be the size of car garages and there were even two-storey pillboxes that could shelter up to 40 soldiers. Additionally, a cunning design feature meant that rear-facing walls were thinner and weaker. If German troops had to retreat from a pillbox, the Allies would subsequently find that the walls facing the enemy offered little protection.

Although many lacked firing platforms, pillboxes were formidable in combat. In the area around Passchendaele the Germans scattered hundreds of pillboxes in three main lines of defence over several kilometres. Their positions provided mutually supporting crossfire that were also backed up by concreted machine gun posts on open ground and counterattack troops and artillery in the rear.

Such was the pillboxes' importance that they became crucial Allied objectives, but they were extremely difficult to overcome. Attacking troop formations were quickly broken up and soldiers then became vulnerable to machine gun fire.

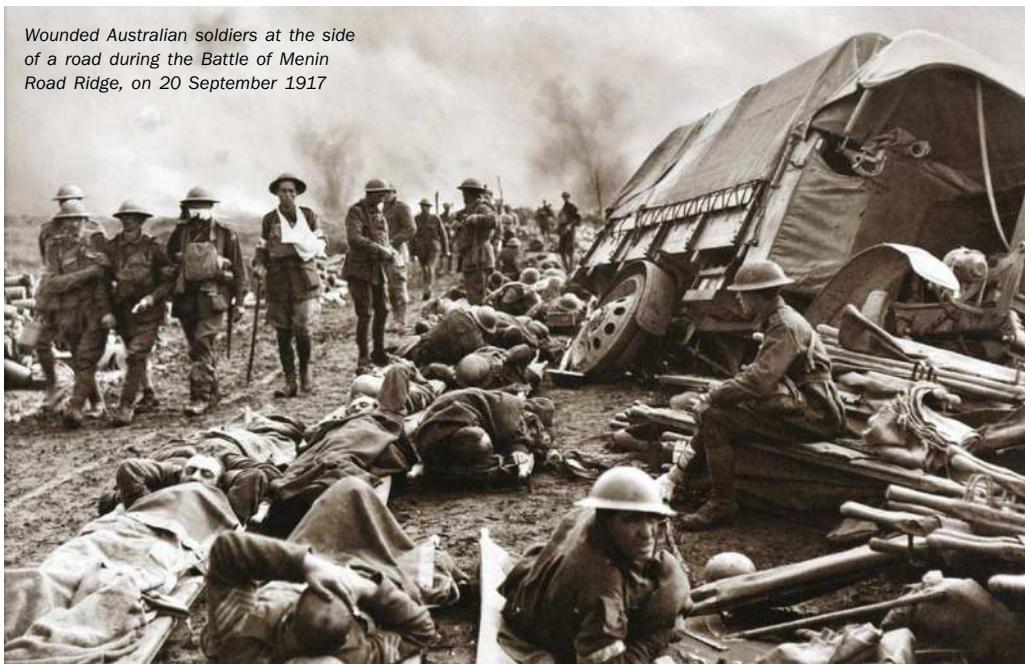
Nevertheless, the ground had to be taken and only infantry could achieve it. Small groups would advance under creeping barrage fire and enter a pillbox from the rear using grenades and even bayonets. Pillbox garrisons often surrendered at this stage, but many Germans were killed in cold blood by enraged Allied troops.

To capture and neutralise a pillbox required great courage and tenacity from Allied troops and many decorations were subsequently awarded, including five Victoria Crosses to Australian soldiers during the Third Battle of Ypres. The Allied infantrymen eventually prevailed over the pillbox, but with a tremendous loss of life in the process.





Canadian soldiers and German prisoners crossing the muddy battlefield in the area around Passchendaele



Wounded Australian soldiers at the side of a road during the Battle of Menin Road Ridge, on 20 September 1917

## “WITHIN THOSE FIVE MILES, THERE HAD BEEN AT LEAST 275,000 ALLIED AND 260,000 GERMAN CASUALTIES OVER THREE MONTHS”

### A MUDDY SEA OF FUTILITY

Nevertheless, the capture of Passchendaele was the smallest achievement imaginable because the village lay only five miles beyond the starting point of the offensive. Within those five miles, there had been at least 275,000 Allied and 260,000 German casualties over the course of three months, a combined total of almost half a million men. Haig's grand plan to break through and snuff out the U-boat menace had resulted in little more than making the Allied bulge in the Ypres Salient slightly larger.

Worse was to come the following year when the German Spring Offensive of 1918 forced the Allies to give up much of their hard-fought ground as indefensible. That arguably rendered the effort and horror of 1917 as pointless. Thus Passchendaele was condemned by many as a vivid symbol of the perceived futility of the fighting on the Western Front and even the war itself. Despite his successes in helping to achieve the

later Allied victory in 1918, Haig's leadership at Passchendaele, along with the Somme, sealed his reputation as a controversial commander. The human cost at the Third Battle of Ypres has remained notorious for a century, particularly Haig's decision to continue the offensive into November 1917, and the debate over the battle's importance (or worthlessness) among historians will probably never be resolved.

For those who actually fought there, however, the Battle of Passchendaele was a nightmare that had no positive outcome, as Second Lieutenant J W Naylor of the Royal Artillery later explained, “I came to hate that salient. Absolutely loathed it. You could practically segregate the salient from the whole rest of the war zone. It wore you down. The weather, the lack of rations, everything seemed to be against you. There didn't seem to be anything left. You were wet through for days on end. We never thought we'd get out alive. You couldn't see the cloud with the silver lining. There wasn't one.”

## ‘THE LAST FIGHTING TOMMY’

This Englishman escaped the carnage of Passchendaele to become the last surviving combat soldier of WWI

Born on 17 June 1898, in Somerset, Harry Patch was an ordinary man who, like millions of other British men during WWI, was conscripted and fought in the trenches of the Western Front. Unlike many, however, Patch lived into extreme old age and was able to tell the story of his war well into the 21st Century.

Patch had been an apprentice plumber in Bath before he was conscripted into the British Army in October 1916 and completed his training as a private. He arrived in France in June 1917 and was soon in the Ypres Salient, serving as a Lewis machine gunner with C Company of the 7th Battalion in the Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry. He took part in the August fighting around Langemarck and recalled ‘going over the top’ for the first time, “I can still see the bewilderment and fear on men's faces as we went over the top. We crawled because if you stood up you'd be killed. All over the battlefield the wounded were lying there, English and German, all crying for help.”

Throughout his time on the front, Patch took care not to kill advancing Germans and would wound them in the legs instead with his machine gun. Patch's luck ran out, however, on 22 September 1917, when a shell exploded above his Lewis gun team while they were returning from the front line. Three of his close friends were killed and Patch received a serious wound in the groin that meant he was invalided home to England. He never saw action again.

Remarkably, Patch did not speak about his war experiences until he was 100 years old, but he subsequently became an increasingly visible presence who participated in media interviews and commemorations. He travelled to Flanders in 2007 to commemorate the 90th anniversary of the Battle of Passchendaele and laid a wreath at the Cenotaph in London on 11 November 2008 to mark the 90th anniversary of the Armistice. By the time Patch died, aged 111, on 25 July 2009 he was the oldest man in Europe and the last surviving combat soldier of WWI from any country.









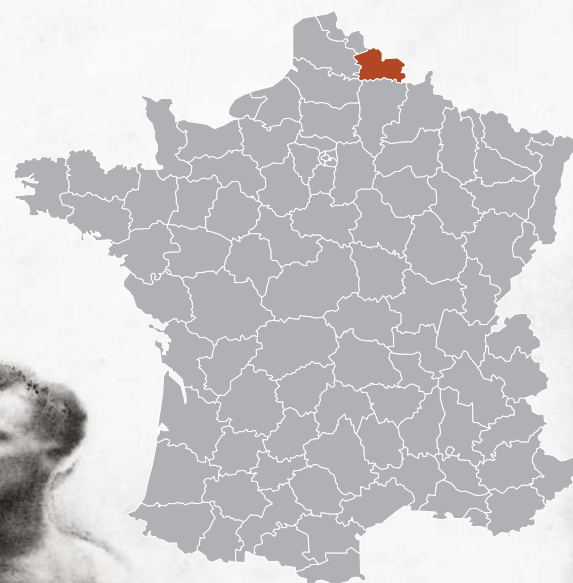
# CAMBRAI

20 NOVEMBER - 7 DECEMBER 1917

When the British Army deployed tanks to change the pace of the First World War, it changed the face of it instead

**B**y 1917 the British Army's notions of war had changed entirely. Any romantic ideals of the glory of combat and the open battlefield had been trampled and drowned in the blood-drenched, rain-slicked mud and barbed wire of the trenches of the Somme. Men fought and died for yards that felt like inches. Three years of almost imperceptible movement in the fields of France had pulled the wool from British commanders' eyes.

With change so desperately needed, it's not surprising that the plan of attack at Cambrai was the product of ideas from three groups. British preliminary bombardment meant German forces were always alerted to the fact an attack was imminent, enabling a tactical retreat before a counter-attack. In August 1917, artillery commander Brigadier General Henry Hugh Tudor proposed 'silent registration' of guns, bringing the artillery to the battlefield without alerting the enemy.



## WHO

The British Third Army, including Commonwealth and American troops, up against the German Second Army.

## WHAT

The first major tank battle of the First World War, seeing hundreds of British modified Mark IV tanks deployed.

## WHERE

Cambrai, France. Part of the Hindenburg Line, it was heavily defended and a key supply station for German forces.

## WHY

Attempting to break the cycle of trench warfare, the assault was meant as a 48-hour lightning attack to gain key positions.

## OUTCOME

An important lesson in the co-operation between tanks and infantry, but one that came at a huge cost with very few tactical gains.



British soldiers photographed during the battle. The photo's original caption reads: "Down in a shell crater, we fought like Kilkenny cats"

**RIGHT** Field Marshal Douglas Haig was the most senior British commander during WWI



**BELOW** General Julian Byng, commander of the British Third Army, pictured in April 1917



## "WITH SIX INFANTRY DIVISIONS, FIVE CAVALRY DIVISIONS AND NINE TANK BATTALIONS, MORE THAN 1,000 GUNS WERE MUSTERED FOR THE ATTACK"

This process would be greatly assisted by the use of the No.106 instantaneous fuses, which meant that shells would detonate immediately upon impact.

Meanwhile, the Tank Corps' Brigadier General Hugh Elles and Lieutenant Colonel John Fuller were desperate for a chance to show their machines' worth. Fuller was convinced they would be capable of conducting lightning raids to smash resistance and drive the British line forward. This dovetailed neatly with Tudor's plan, as General Julian Byng, head of the Third Army, recognised. Byng turned his eye to Cambrai, a quiet area used by the Germans as supply point. While it was very well defended with the deep trenches of the Hindenburg Line and barbed wire, an attack would certainly be unexpected despite the area's strategic value.

With six infantry divisions, five cavalry divisions and nine tank battalions, more than 1,000 guns were mustered for the attack. There would be a front of around 10,000 yards, covered by the III and IV Corps of the Third Army, which would be widened as the attack progressed. The III Corps had to break the Masnières-Beaurevoir line, enabling the cavalry to circle around Cambrai and cut it off from reinforcements before 48 hours had passed. Obviously, secrecy was paramount.

The Mark IV tanks were divided into "male" and "female" groups, with the former having four Lewis guns and two six-pounder Hotchkiss naval guns. The latter were each fitted with six Lewis guns. Without the naval guns, the "female" tanks were lighter, at 26 tons, while the "males" weighed 28. The crews also noticed that while the males had a door at the back, the female tanks had doors closer to the ground that were harder to get out of in an emergency. Eight men shared the single space with the engine, while the machine was only capable of reaching a speed of 3.7mph, and more typically around 1mph over bad terrain.

The tanks would lead, providing cover for the infantry as they crushed the barbed wire effortlessly under their tracks. As for navigating the trenches, each tank carried a fascine – a bundle of wood and branches, which would be deposited into the trench in order to fill it, so that the vehicle could drive over it. Meanwhile, a grapnel was fitted to some of the tanks to enable them to drag away the crumpled wire as they went, so that the path was clear of obstacles for the advancing cavalry.

Several things needed to go very right in order for this so-called "clockwork" battle to work. Haig had fallen victim to overreaching in previous campaigns and he was determined that the

Cambrai offensive have limited objectives and stick to its time frame. Minimising losses was crucial – even more so when he was forced to send two divisions to support the Italian front. Co-operation and communication between the divisions was also vital, as the battle's events would prove.

## THE BATTLE RUMBLES TO LIFE

The attack began at 6.20am on 20 November as the artillery began shelling. With this stunning overture, the tanks advanced into the fog. The gentle incline made things very easy for the drivers, while the infantry marvelled at the ease with which the tanks rolled over the barbed wire as they followed them into battle, as did the men inside the tanks.

The initial advance seemed to be going impossibly well. The "clockwork battle" was living up to its name as the Germans were taken completely by surprise by this sudden, shocking attack. The British artillery kept up a devastating rate of fire, as much as possible given the two-rounds-per-minute rule to avoid overheating. The advance was also supported by the Royal Flying Corps, whose targets were on the ground rather than in the air.

As the pilots braved machine-gun fire to drop their payloads, the weather worked against them. An Australian squadron pushed through punishingly thick fog at Havrincourt, barely able to see one another, let alone their targets. If their planes went down, they had to fight their way back to their lines, as Lieutenant Harry Taylor was



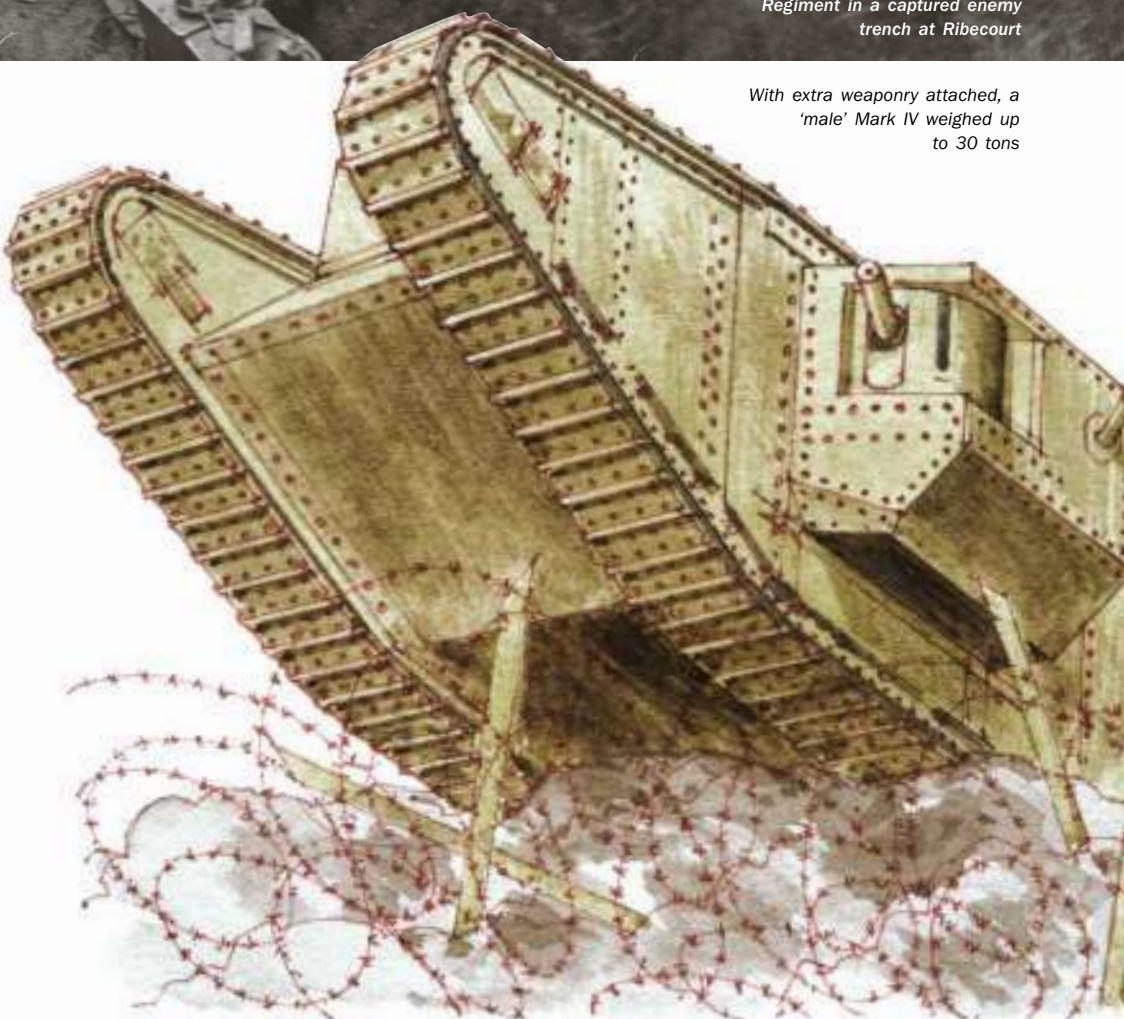


*Men from the 11th Leicester Regiment in a captured enemy trench at Ribecourt*

forced to do, picking up the weapon of a fallen man and setting out to find support.

This isn't to say there was no resistance. A myth sprung up as the days went on about a German gunner who held the enemy at bay entirely by himself. That myth does a disservice to the determination and skill of the men who suddenly found themselves on the back foot. Some of the troops stationed near Cambrai had come from the Russian front and had never seen a tank before. It's impossible to know what these soldiers thought as the metal leviathans rolled towards them, but they fell back on their training, resisting where possible before making a tactical retreat.

Before long, communication began to prove an issue. When the tanks worked in tandem with the infantry, such as through Havrincourt and Graincourt, things went very smoothly. Elsewhere, infantrymen were forced to bang on the door of the tanks to get their attention, while confusion over objectives led to groups of infantry being forced to take key positions without artillery support. However, sitting in these slow-moving targets had its own terrors. They drew the bulk of enemy fire and if the engine gave out, whether due to attack, water in the fuel tank, or even a fire, the tank became a sitting duck. Once engaged in combat, the inside of the tank would become hot as the guns began to fire and the sound of their doing so was deafening. Visibility was shockingly poor, while the fact that most tanks had to stop in order to turn meant that they were a popular target on the battlefield.



*With extra weaponry attached, a 'male' Mark IV weighed up to 30 tons*



Nevertheless, the speed with which they were taking ground was intoxicating; each trench taken and each line of wire cleared was another step towards the objective and morale had rarely been higher. As the tanks moved further away from their lines of reinforcement, establishing a clear road and lines of communication back became crucial. However, the supply mules proved nearly useless in the tangle of mud and wire, while the narrow roads quickly became clogged with traffic back and forth, ferrying wounded and prisoners.

## THE THIRD ARMY CONSOLIDATES

Despite the ground gained, the first day ended with some major concerns. While crossing trenches had proved easy enough for the tanks, moving past the St Quentin Canal was another matter indeed. A crucial bridge at Masnières had been crushed by a tank that had attempted to cross the canal, stopping the planned infantry advance, while another had been mined. The cavalry was delayed by the clogged roads, while a lack of communication frequently meant they were stranded or forced to retreat. A lone squadron of Canadian cavalry realised it was the only unit to make it across the canal at Masnières and was forced to find its way back around and across.

Meanwhile, the key village of Flesquières had not been captured after the advancing tank divisions became separated from the infantry of the 51<sup>st</sup> (Highland) Division. With no infantry support, the tanks were target practice for the gunners at Flesquières ridge and suffered huge losses. Messengers from the battlefield, some of whom walked the two miles on foot, struggled to convince their commanders that Flesquières had not yet been captured. Crucially, Major General George Montague Harper refused to commit any of the troops held in reserve to take the objective.

The second day required consolidation and advancement. Masnières was taken in the morning, but as a salient it was open to a punishing amount of shell and machine-gun fire, and the German air force soon reappeared to make life very difficult for the British troops.

## OPPOSING FORCES

### BRITISH

#### LEADERS

Field Marshal Douglas Haig,  
General Julian Byng

#### INFANTRY

2 Corps (6 divisions)

#### CAVALRY

5 divisions

#### TANKS

476 (378 fighting tanks)

#### PLANES

14 squadrons

#### RESERVES

4 divisions

#### GAME CHANGERS

378 fighting tanks that enabled the British to move forward at an incredible rate on the first day of fighting.

### GERMANS

#### LEADERS

General Georg von der Marwitz, Crown Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria

#### INFANTRY

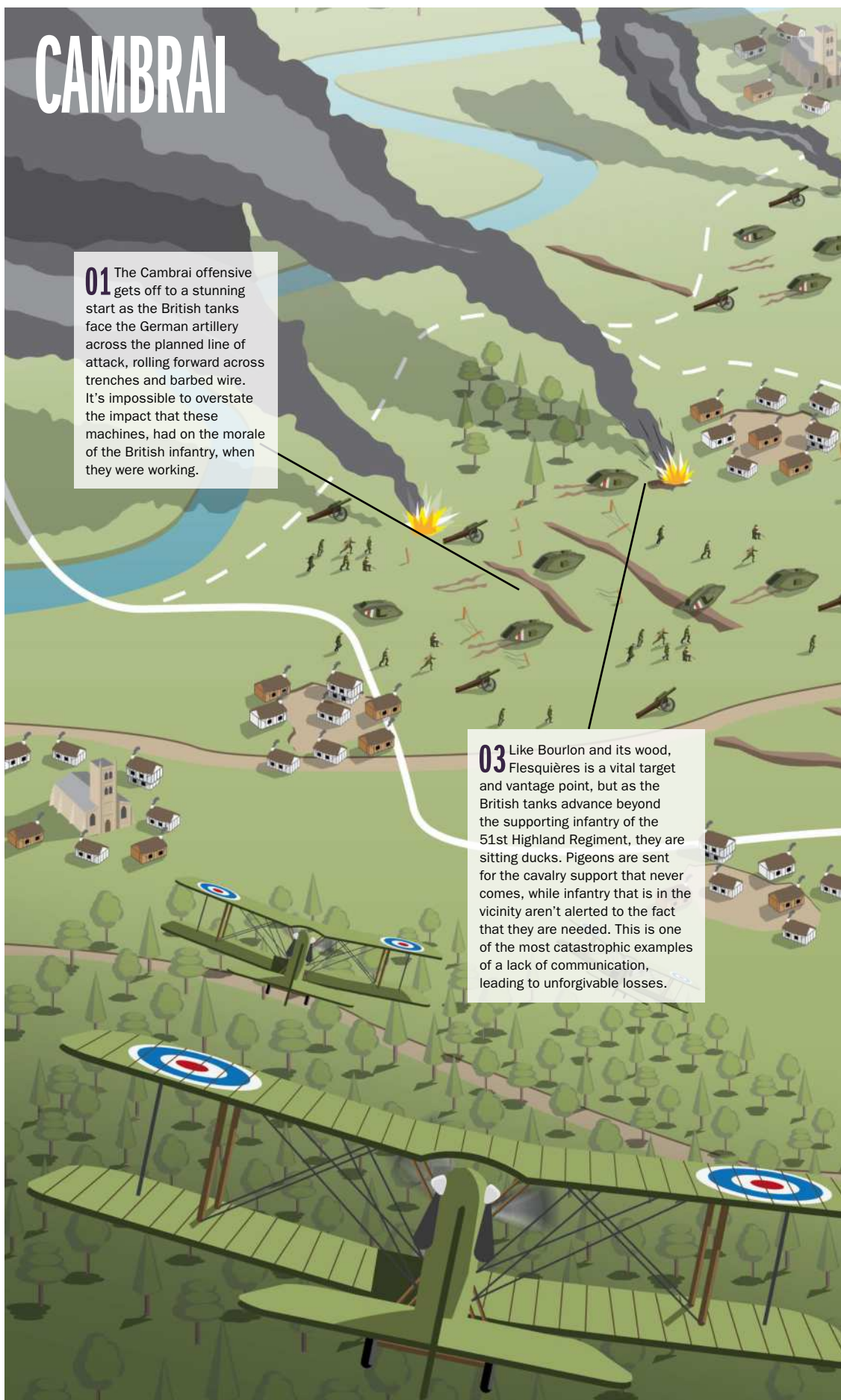
1 Corps

#### PLANES

Baron Manfred von Richtofen's Jagdgeschwader 1 (approx. 40 planes)

#### GAME CHANGERS

The air force led by Baron Von Richtofen that arrived on the 23 November to combat the RFC and attack the British ground forces.







**04** Some of the most brutal and devastating fighting breaks out in Bourlon Wood. Capturing it is crucial for the British as it's an excellent vantage point for German firepower. Once British forces enter the trees, the infantry are on their own and some wounded men will be wait days to be rescued. Facing fierce resistance from German infantry, not to mention shelling and aircraft fire, Bourlon Wood continues to be fiercely contested at a terrible cost.

**05** Few locations exchange hands as often as the small village of Fontaine. It's strategically important but painfully open to attack, as the British learn shortly after taking it. By the 26 November, the Grenadier Guards manage to take Fontaine despite incredible losses, but the lack of support means they're forced to retreat not long after their victory.

**02** If the British forces are to circle around from the South, it is crucial to cross the St Quentin canal at Masnières. This initiative fails spectacularly when bridges are either been mined by the Germans or collapse under the weight of the tanks. All supplies and reinforcements now have to come by road, which quickly becomes choked.

**06** The German counterattack on 30 November takes place all across the line, but the speed with which they strike Gouzeaucourt seems staggering. British troops fall back and take shelter in a nearby quarry, but soon realise that they have given themselves no cover, with only one option remaining. The number of British prisoners taken is incredibly high.





Meanwhile, the tanks had used all their improvised wooden fascine bridges on the first day, which made crossing the trenches incredibly difficult, and the infantry were reluctant to advance without them.

Things looked much better for the IV Corps, which advanced on Flesquières dreading the prospect of a prepared German resistance, only to find it had been abandoned. In contrast, while the cavalry helped take Cantaing, it struggled to work in tandem with the tanks as planned. Similarly, as the tanks moved into villages, it became clear they were not prepared for street fighting. With no machine gun on the top of the tank (it would be introduced in 1918), they were horribly vulnerable to fire from second-storey windows. Still, Fontaine was secured despite heavy losses, leaving Bourslon and its dense wood as the next target.

The offensive was on a knife edge without enough men to consolidate these gains. Fontaine was incredibly vulnerable, but was refused any artillery support and destroyed bridges made moving supplies incredibly difficult. Meanwhile, the German vantage points of Bourslon and Bourslon Wood posed a serious threat to the British. After a last-ditch effort ordered by Byng to push through, the order came to halt and dig in.

## **“RESISTANCE WAS GROWING, AND AS THE BRITISH DUG IN FOR THE NIGHT IN THE MISERABLE NOVEMBER COLD THEY KNEW THAT THEIR MOMENTUM WAS DRIPPING AWAY”**

When Haig learned of the attack's successes and failures, he decided to junk the 48-hour time limit and continue the advance. He toured the battlefield, congratulating the men and helping to spread the myth of the lone German gunner at the Flesquières ridge, as that was surely a better explanation for the number of ruined British machines on the battlefield than the alternative. During this apparent lull on 22 November, German forces rushed Fontaine and retook it. Resistance was growing, and as the British dug in for the night in the miserable November cold they knew that their momentum was dripping away. Haig stressed to Byng that Bourslon and Fontaine must be captured by the end of 23 November.

### **BITTER FIGHTING AT BOURLON WOOD**

The fresh offensive was major, with 400 guns and 92 tanks, while the 40<sup>th</sup> Bantam Division was dispatched to relieve some of the exhausted

men at the front. The tanks met fierce resistance in Fontaine, and were forced to withdraw to the disapproval of Tanks Corps intelligence officer Captain Elliot Hotblack, who saw the effect their retreat had on the infantry's morale. Further down the line, German infantry made life hell for the tanks, finding the machine gunners' blind spots and throwing hand grenades inside, leaving the British soldiers trapped and burning.

Having reached Bourslon Wood with the help of the tanks, fighting through the thick wood was now the infantry's job alone. It was here that some of the most intense and gruesome combat was seen. Running from tree to tree, with an unimaginable noise of ceaseless gun and artillery fire, a humongous number of British soldiers were lost in Bourslon Wood.

When the German forces were finally pushed out, they started shelling it. Meanwhile, both Bourslon and Fontaine remained in German hands despite attempts in the afternoon, but the night





**ABOVE** *Tommies look on as British artillery arrives at Cambrai in December, 1917*

**FAR LEFT** *German officers pose with a captured British tank in Cambrai. Hundreds of stranded or abandoned British machines were captured during the brutal offensive*



**LEFT** *Manfred von Richtofen, known as 'The Red Baron', played a pivotal role from the air at Cambrai*

fell, troops were sent to support the men in Bourslon Wood as counter attacks from the Germans continued well into the night. Haig told Byng that Bourslon ridge simply must be taken, so the Guard division was summoned to support and relieve the depleted forces.

Throughout 24 November, shelling and counterattacks continued on Bourslon Wood. Poor weather made it difficult for any RFC pilots to take to the skies and challenge the forces of the recently arrived Manfred von Richthofen, the Red Baron, whose planes rained fire on the wood. German efforts to grind down the soldiers in the wood continued throughout the day.

Counterattack met counterattack, and 25 November saw further terrible lapses in communication and bloody skirmishes. Battalions without tank support were mown down by machine-gun fire at Bourslon, while an entire cavalry regiment ordered to wait within sight of the German artillery was shelled. A furious Haig ordered the capture of Bourslon and Fontaine by the 27 November, as German forces continued to push at the exhausted British throughout the night.

A planned attack on 26 November was the cause of fierce argument between Major General Braithwaite, who bemoaned the lack of support and fresh troops, and Byng, who had his

instructions from Haig. The attack went ahead, as Fontaine was taken at tremendous cost and targets in Bourslon Wood were reached. However, there was barely time to note the achievements before counterattacks drove the British forces back once more.

## THE GERMAN OFFENSIVE

While skirmishes wore both sides down, the time had come for the major German counter-offensive after reinforcements had been arriving since the second day of the attack. Planned by Crown Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria, and widened by his superior General Erich Ludendorff, it was the first offensive planned against the British since 1915. Gas was fired into the wood two days before the attack, and at 6am on 30 November the assault began. Despite the warnings of some key officers, the British troops were simply not prepared for the assault at Gouzeaucourt, as German soldiers swarmed the British line and amassed prisoners. This was the first instance of the German stormtroop tactics, as the first wave of soldiers went around targets and cut them off as the further troops arrived.

As British soldiers realised what was happening, across all their lines, attempts were made to

regroup and stand their ground as startled officers threw down their shaving kits and looked for their weapons. While German forces broke through in some places and were held up in others, communication broke down once again. There was simply no plan in place for this kind of counterattack, meaning that any attempts to fight back and reclaim ground were made on the hoof.

Much as the Germans had offered fierce resistance, so too now did the British. At Les Rues Vertes, the inspired and determined defensive tactics of Captain Robert Gee meant that their position and the brigade's ammunition dumps were held. He set up a Lewis gun, organised bombing raids against the attackers, killed two Germans who had infiltrated his position and killed the guards, before charging a German machine-gun post with his two pistols. While seeking medical attention he was forced to jump into a canal and swim to safety. His actions earned him the Victoria Cross.

As reinforcements arrived, the Guards Brigade retook Gouzeaucourt, while the forces in Bourslon Wood held determinedly to their positions. The conflict turned into a series of costly but unproductive skirmishes. As the days passed and the casualties mounted, Haig finally realised the necessity to fall back and form a line for the winter. He ordered a retreat on 3 December and by 7 December the lines had settled, with both sides having made considerable gains and losses in territory.

The British casualties numbered 44,207 killed, wounded or missing. The number of German losses has proved harder to calculate, with estimates ranging between 41,000 and 53,300. The battle has proven to be one of the most fertile grounds for myths of the First World War to form, but what is clear is that crucial lessons were learned in how important communication and co-operation between different divisions was.

A lack of support in reserve, a lack of communication, and that terrible desire to overreach led to the attack's failure. While it may have been the first large-scale tank offensive in the war, this landmark came at a terrible cost to both sides.



1917

*General Sir Edmund Allenby  
enters Jerusalem without  
fanfare after liberating the city  
on 11 December 1917*





# THE BATTLE OF JERUSALEM

9 JANUARY - 11 DECEMBER 1917

During a campaign that lasted nearly a year, British and Arab forces defeated the Ottoman Turks and entered the ancient city of Jerusalem

British Prime Minister David Lloyd George wanted the ancient city of Jerusalem as a Christmas present, but for more than 400 years the centre of three great religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, had been ruled by the Ottoman Turks. In the midst of the Great War, however, there was opportunity to strike a decisive blow against the Germans and their Turkish allies in the Middle East while the occupation of Jerusalem would serve as a great boost to Allied morale.

In Palestine, the British were aided by the Arab Revolt that erupted against the Ottoman Turks in June 1916, and through diplomatic and strategic assistance, they encouraged the Arabs, particularly those led by the third son of Sherif Hussein Ibn Ali of Mecca, named Feisal. To help Feisal coordinate operations, a young archaeologist named TE Lawrence had been enlisted as an agent and became the official British advisor to the rebel Arabs.

From a strategic standpoint, the British focus on Palestine was engineered by Lloyd George to attack the weakest of the Central Powers, Ottoman Turkey. The year 1917 had been one of frustration on the Western Front with great loss of life at Cambrai, Arras, and other locations. Rumours were circulating that Russia might make a separate peace with Germany and pull out of the war. Wrestling control of Palestine from the Turks would be a balm for the British people, particularly because of its religious significance.

In mid-1916, The Egypt Expeditionary Force (EEF), commanded by Lieutenant General Sir Archibald Murray, had stepped off toward Palestine, an arduous trek from Egypt that required a transit of the Sinai Peninsula.

Murray's force was truly representative of the Commonwealth, including Britons, Australians, and New Zealanders (ANZAC), fine infantry and cavalrymen who pursued the retreating Turks with vigour. Early in the effort, however, Murray's force was weakened with the departure of a combat division. Further slowing the progress was the necessity of provisioning men and horses. Covering miles of trackless desert required the troops to build a water pipeline, standard gauge railroad, and a road reinforced with wire mesh as they went.

Sharp battles were fought at El Arish and Magdhaba, oases in the Sinai Desert, and Rafa was captured as the British crossed into Palestine on their 190-kilometre (120-mile) trek. As spring approached, Murray's five divisions and attached units continued their advance along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea, skirting the hills between the town of Gaza and the village of Beersheba, 40 kilometres (25 miles) inland. Gaza became the initial objective of Murray's campaign, and on 26 March the British attacked.

Gaza offered advantages for the defenders, as gardens and fields were laced with barriers of cactus and hiding places for infantry and machine guns. Fog delayed the assault, but progress was good from the beginning as the Turks were taken somewhat by surprise. Fighting extended toward dusk, and the German commander in the town resigned himself to the fact that his position was hopeless and decided to surrender. Then, the British senior command intervened and saved the day for the defenders.

Murray's troops were only able to carry rations and water for a single day, and when the fighting persisted, his concern for the welfare of the horses mounted. Word had also arrived

that the Turks were to receive reinforcements, although the EEF would still outnumber the defenders. Complicating the situation, Murray had inexplicably located his headquarters at El Arish, 80 kilometres (50 miles) away, and was therefore unable to assess the situation for himself. In a dramatic loss of confidence, he ordered a withdrawal, literally snatching defeat from the jaws of victory.

Three weeks later, Murray attempted to take Gaza a second time, but the situation had deteriorated further. The Turks had indeed been reinforced, and they had been given time to improve their defences, digging an elaborate system of trenches and erecting fortifications. Murray failed to reconnoiter the enemy positions adequately and did little to take advantage of the few available tanks. His request for two more combat divisions was denied. The second attack on Gaza was launched on 17 April and led rapidly to disaster. Two days of fighting produced nothing but 6,000 British soldiers dead or wounded. Murray had run out of time and exhausted the goodwill of Lloyd George.

General Sir Edmund Allenby, a commander who had actually fallen out of favour with Sir Douglas Haig – the controversial commander of the British Expeditionary Force in Europe, after the Battle of Arras – was detailed to Palestine to reinvigorate the campaign to liberate Jerusalem. Allenby, a burly South African nicknamed 'the Bull', was firmly instructed to occupy Jerusalem by Christmas Day. He arrived in Palestine on 28 June and set about the business at hand.

Still plagued by shortages of water and other supplies, Allenby finally received the reinforcements that had been denied to Murray. He also redirected the British effort toward Beersheba temporarily to convince the Turks that the strategic impetus of the campaign was now elsewhere. In fact, the thrust toward Beersheba was a diversion while the real objective of the renewed offensive remained at Gaza. While

**“THE SECOND ATTACK ON GAZA WAS LAUNCHED ON 17 APRIL AND LED RAPIDLY TO DISASTER”**



Feisal, Lawrence and the Arabs tried to cut the enemy rail line at Der'a, the Turks were busy improving defences, and the combined force of Turkish and German soldiers known as the Yilderim or Thunderbolt Force, commanded by German General Erich von Falkenhayn, arrived from Mesopotamia, largely comprised of Turkish riflemen under German officers.

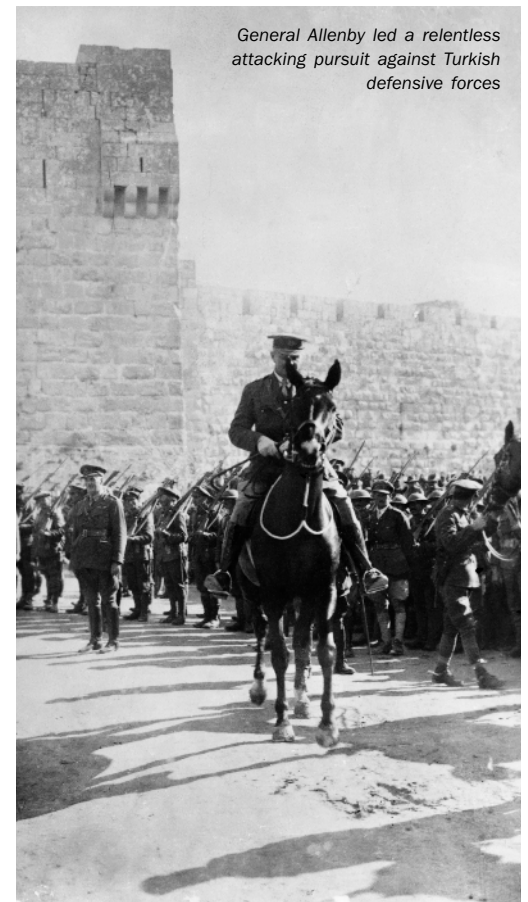
On 31 October 1917, Allenby ordered a diversionary artillery bombardment of Gaza while transferring troops eastward to Beersheba and unleashing 40,000 soldiers with the support of 100 guns on a front of five kilometres (three miles). The British action was swift as infantrymen cut their way through barbed wire entanglements and advanced. To the north and east, the horsemen of the ANZAC division swept across open ground against little opposition and fell upon the surprised defenders at Beersheba. Traversing two lines of enemy trenches, the cavalrymen dismounted, advanced on foot, and wreaked havoc among the Turks, capturing 1,400 prisoners, while losing only 200 dead and wounded themselves.

Allenby's plan proved a work of tactical brilliance. The rupture of the Turkish line at

Beersheba forced them to transfer troops from Gaza, weakening that key position. On 1 November, the British attacked Gaza, and within a week the Turks were in headlong retreat. The road to Jerusalem was open.

While their Arab allies protected their flank, the British marched resolutely toward Jerusalem, covering 80 kilometres (50 miles) in 17 days and bagging 10,000 Turkish prisoners. The Turks mounted fierce rearguard actions to buy time, and Allenby ordered a two-pronged advance. On 16 November, the British captured Jaffa on the coast while the second line continued toward Jerusalem. Bad weather impeded progress, but Allenby was relentless in his pursuit of success, pushing his troops to near exhaustion.

Both the British and their enemies respected the symbolic significance of Jerusalem and were under orders not to fight within the city. Allenby decided to encircle Jerusalem, but a brief counterattack by the Yilderim Force disrupted the first attempt to accomplish this in late November. Allenby resolved to try again, and on the night of 7 December his troops moved up the Jaffa-Jerusalem Road through a steady rain. Supported by artillery, they were soon on the outskirts of



General Allenby led a relentless attacking pursuit against Turkish defensive forces

## “ON 16 NOVEMBER, THE BRITISH CAPTURED JAFFA ON THE COAST WHILE THE SECOND LINE CONTINUED TOWARD JERUSALEM”



Mounted troops proved extremely effective in the Battle of Jerusalem

*Charge of the 4th Mounted Brigade at El-Mughfir, during the British Advance on Jerusalem, Nov 13 1917*

*As Backs and Dorset Yeomanry were ordered to capture the Turkish positions after the Infantry had been held up through lack of cover. The Yeomanry drove the enemy out after a dashing charge.*



*In the early days of World War I in 1914, German soldiers march through the streets of Jerusalem*



Jerusalem, startling the Turks with their rapid movement in inclement weather.

The Turks in Jerusalem viewed the withdrawal of their forward defenders, pushed back seven kilometres (four miles) from their trenches, as a signal for a general retirement and abandoned the city within hours. Jerusalem was taken virtually without another shot being fired, and the occupation of the Mount of Olives heralded the final occupation of the holy city. Allenby remained conscious of the symbolism the city held and entered Jerusalem on foot on 11 December, stressing that he had arrived as a liberator and not a conqueror.

After entering through the Jaffa Gate, Allenby issued a proclamation declaring martial law. It was read in six languages, English, French, Arabic, Russian, Hebrew, and Greek. It said in part: "Since your city is regarded with affection by the adherents of three of the great religions of mankind and its soil has been consecrated by the prayers and pilgrimages of multitudes of devout people, I make it known to you that every sacred building, monument, holy spot, shrine, traditional site, endowment, pious bequest, or customary place of prayer will be maintained and protected according to the existing customs and beliefs of those to whose faith they are sacred."

The Prime Minister sent the following communiqué: "War Cabinet wishes to congratulate you on the capture of Jerusalem, which is an event of historic and world-wide significance and

has given the greatest pleasure to the British and other Allied people."

Lloyd George had his Christmas present, and the Allies occupied a line running 24 kilometres (15 miles) northwest to Jericho and 6.4 kilometres four miles (four miles) north and east from Jerusalem to Nablus. The Allies had seized the initiative in the Middle East. Britain would maintain control of Jerusalem for more than 30 years.



**ABOVE** Turkish soldiers and dependents stand under a white flag following the surrender of Jerusalem to British forces under Sir Edmund Allenby



**ABOVE** TE Lawrence, or Lawrence of Arabia, rendered great service to the Allied cause in the Middle East during World War I

## LAWRENCE OF ARABIA

TE Lawrence became a legend while working with the Arabs against the Central Powers in World War I

TE Lawrence, forever remembered as Lawrence of Arabia, called the liberation of Jerusalem the "supreme moment of the war." When World War I erupted, Lawrence had been working as an archaeologist in the Middle East. His knowledge of local languages and customs came to the attention of the British authorities, and he was soon enlisted as a liaison with the Arabs in revolt against the Ottoman Turks. Lawrence established good relations with Arabs and their leader, Sherif Hussein Ibn Ali of Mecca, and his son Feisal.

Dressed in Arab garb, Lawrence assisted Feisal in the defense of Yenbo in November 1916, the capture of Aqaba the following summer, and then in the conduct of raids against the Turkish rail line in Palestine. By 1918, Lawrence was with Feisal in Syria, where the Arabs marched into Damascus alongside the British in October. Lawrence later became disenchanted as the British failed to uphold wartime pledges made to the Arabs. Serving as Feisal's advisor during the Paris Peace Conference of 1919, he considered the placing of Syria under a French mandate as a significant affront to the Arabs so closely allied to Britain during the Great War. Lawrence died at the age of 46 in 1935 from injuries received in a motorcycle accident.



# 1918

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# THE SPRING OFFENSIVE

21 MARCH - 18 JULY 1918

On 21 March, the German army spectacularly broke the deadlock of the Western Front. The Allies' dynamic response ensured that the line was restored within a fortnight

**O**n 20 March 1918 General Marie-Émile Fayolle, who was to lead the Allied reserves that engaged and halted 'Operation Michael', the first strike of the German 1918 Spring Offensive, noted in his diary, "More and more it seems to be confirmed that the Boche will not attack." In their shattering offensive that commenced the next morning, General Erich Ludendorff's armies would secure that elusive and momentary advantage essential to battlefield victory – surprise.

Several other factors facilitated their early success. First, it was a matter of scale: an attack with 74 infantry divisions along an 80-kilometre (50-mile) front was the largest seen on the Western Front since the battles of 1914. Second, it was a result of method: overwhelming artillery fire coordinated with dynamic infantry tactics to shatter the enemy's forward defences. Third, there was an element of good fortune: the British lines, against which the first blow fell, were held more thinly than other sectors of the front, and an early morning mist screened the first waves of attacking infantry as they left their trenches to engage the barrage-numbered British defenders.

The blow was a shock to the Allies: "It's the final battle," Fayolle noted, somewhat prematurely, on 22 March. But the German army's tactical prowess masked operational weaknesses that the Allies could exploit once they had organised to contain and counterattack. A week of hasty reorganisation followed, but within a fortnight the immediate danger had passed.

Ludendorff was taking advantage of a brief window of opportunity brought about by the withdrawal of Bolshevik Russia from the war to try to win a military victory before Allied superiority in

resources and manpower, which had started to tell from 1916, overwhelmed Germany. In the spring, before American troops started to arrive in large numbers, he could bring veteran troops from the Eastern Front that would give Germany superiority in forces on the Western Front for the first time. Ludendorff hoped that he might use these to shatter the wearying Anglo-French coalition. The winter lull in fighting enabled him to plan an ambitious series of battles, the 'Kaiserschlacht' or 'Kaiser's battle', although there appeared to be no overall purpose to the Spring Offensive beyond a growing desire to end the war quickly before exhaustion dragged Germany and her allies down.

## THE OFFENSIVE BEGINS

The attack fell on the front of the British Fifth Army commanded by General Hubert Gough opposite St Quentin. Five hours of intensive hurricane bombardment from over 6,500 guns, the greatest concentration of German artillery yet seen in the west, was designed to paralyse the defence, cutting communications and pulverising centres of resistance. Second Lieutenant Gilbert Laithwaite noted that "front and support systems were deluged with thousands of gas shells, mixed with high explosives: communications trenches and junctions barraged, all avenues of approach for reinforcing troops blocked by a chain of fire. Simultaneously all rear Headquarters, transport lines, and heavy guns... were subjected to a heavy bombardment from long-range... guns."

The Allies responded in kind. "I have never seen such a concentration: overhead was a most extraordinary hissing sound – our shells whistling over without any semblance of a break; his guns replying vigorously... The noise was so

**"THE WINTER LULL IN FIGHTING ENABLED HIM TO PLAN AN AMBITIOUS SERIES OF BATTLES"**



## THE SPRING OFFENSIVE

*German storm troops waiting  
to assault British lines on the  
morning of 21 March 1918*





great, and the whole thing so immense, that one's nerves steadied automatically." Laithwaite and his comrades prepared to resist the coming onslaught as best they could. "A last message came through from the observation post – 'Enemy coming over on our right.'... We all jumped up, shook hands and wished good luck. We saw little hope of finishing the morning."

The Allies had anticipated an attack and had tried to organise a 'defence in depth' based on German defensive principles, which utilised a system of mutually supporting strongpoints to break up the enemy's attack before counterattacking with local reserves. However, Fifth Army lacked the forces both to hold their 'battle zone' and to counterattack – Gough had only 12 infantry and three cavalry divisions to hold a 69-kilometre (43-mile) front – especially as the breakdown in communications made it very difficult to control the battle. Gough was to be blamed for the defeat and sacked, although in practice no commander could have mounted an effective riposte in the circumstances.

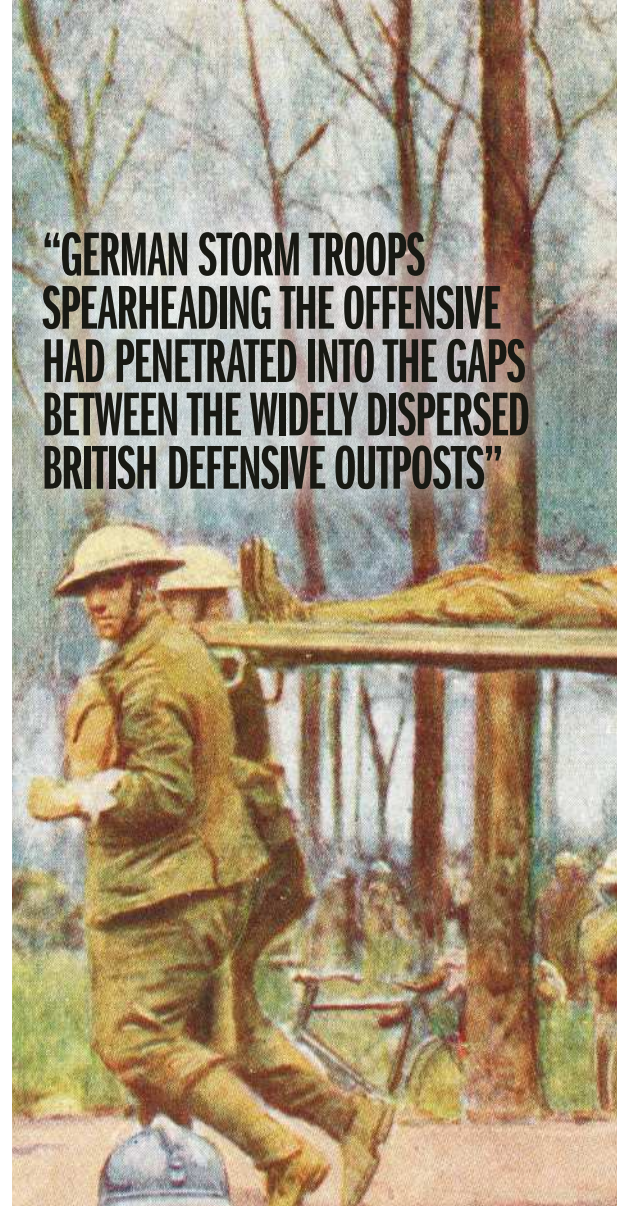
Masked by the mist, German storm troops spearheading the offensive had penetrated into the gaps between the widely dispersed British defensive outposts, leaving them isolated and vulnerable to the follow-up divisions tasked with mopping up British resistance. Trapped garrisons generally fought stubbornly until their ammunition ran out and they were forced to surrender – the advance was no walkover. It took two days for the Germans to fight their way through the Fifth Army's defensive zone, and meanwhile Gough organised his rear-area troops and stragglers

to defend a succession of improvised defensive positions to slow the enemy's advance. Fifth Army was obliged to retreat, but it was no rout, and heavy casualties were inflicted on the pursuing enemy in a series of delaying actions and local counterattacks.

Sergeant Albert Slack left an impression of this rear-guard fighting: "From March 21 to March 25 it was 'touch and run' all the time. ... on March 22... the enemy attacked at dawn and we held him back for several hours till our ammunition was exhausted. Fritz suffered terribly... In the meantime another line had been prepared in the rear and we fell back through this line... The next day... we held off another attack till our flanks were penetrated and then we fell back slowly, keeping our line intact... We attached ourselves to a scratch mob of all sorts and with a fresh supply of ammunition again 'took the field' the same night. The next morning (24th) I haven't a clear idea of what really happened – I was too exhausted. I know we fought and retired, counterattacked... then retired again... I had only two men left in my Section."

Only in the south, where the British line joined the French, had the defence really collapsed, offering a narrow corridor through which the German assault divisions could penetrate. This obliged Ludendorff, who was improvising operations as the battle developed, to concentrate his reserves to the south to try to split the Allied armies, rather than northwards against Arras, which had been his original intention. Below Arras the southern flank of Third Army had also been attacked and had bent back,

**"GERMAN STORM TROOPS  
SPEARHEADING THE OFFENSIVE  
HAD PENETRATED INTO THE GAPS  
BETWEEN THE WIDELY DISPERSED  
BRITISH DEFENSIVE OUTPOSTS"**



*An artist's impression of the link-up between the Allied armies in March 1918: French machine gunners cover the evacuation of British wounded*





## “THE INITIAL STUBBORN BRITISH DEFENCE AND DELAYING ACTIONS THEREAFTER CONTRIBUTED TO REDUCING THE MOMENTUM OF THE ADVANCE, AS DID THE GERMANS’ OWN RELATIVE LACK OF MOBILITY”

but it held, forming one of the solid hinges on which the Allies would anchor the doors that they closed in the advancing Germans’ faces as reinforcements arrived.

The Allies, while momentarily shocked, were able to respond with appropriate countermeasures. Allied contingency plans to reinforce the threatened British front with French divisions proved inadequate in the face of such a powerful blow. French General Ferdinand Foch, appointed to coordinate the Allied response, nevertheless appreciated that all advances lost momentum in time owing to losses and exhaustion in the attacking troops: “The waves die down” he explained to a British liaison officer when asked why he was confident that he could contain any German attack.

The initial stubborn British defence and delaying actions thereafter contributed to reducing the momentum of the advance, as did the Germans’ own relative lack of mobility and the fact that after a few days they had to cross the wasteland of the old 1916 Somme battlefield. With limited cavalry and motorised transport, their advance progressed at only a few kilometres a day, with the exception of 23 March when they pushed beyond the British defensive zone into open country and made 16 kilometres (ten miles).

Moreover, the advance soon extended beyond the range of supporting heavy artillery, making it easier for the Allied reserves, whose own artillery had not yet deployed, to mount effective opposition. French and British cavalry formations could move rapidly to set up a defensive screen to delay the Germans until slower-moving infantry divisions could entrench and re-establish the line. Meanwhile, 77 French squadrons were committed to delaying German progress by bombing and machine-gunning the massed German columns marching westwards.

Since they had to be moved by road and railway from behind the French front, it would take time for Allied reserves to be concentrated to contain the enemy thrust. Meanwhile, steps were taken to make the fractured Anglo-French coalition more solid. Since British Commander-in-Chief Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig and his French counterpart, General Philippe Pétain, felt that the other was not responding to the crisis with sufficient alacrity, their relationship was under strain. To prevent a crisis turning into a disaster, in conference at Doullens on 26 March it was agreed that Foch, the commander with the greatest experience of coalition operations, would coordinate the defence, interceding between Haig and Pétain and effectively controlling Allied reserves. “It’s

## ATTACK VERSUS DEFENCE

By 1918 both sides had developed dynamic modern tactics, whose proper application made the difference between battlefield victory and defeat

The German army’s ‘storm troop’ tactics, which proved so effective in March 1918, are often represented as an innovation that broke the Western Front trench stalemate that had existed since the end of 1914. In fact, it was the scale on which these tactics were applied rather than the method itself that really made a difference on 21 March. German methods were merely one manifestation of the combined-arms tactical systems that all armies had been developing since 1915, which paired overwhelming artillery fire with infantry shock action to overcome fixed defences and capture ground.

Nor were such tactics a surprise to the Allies. The Italian Second Army had been overwhelmed by them at Caporetto in October 1917, and they had been used against the British on a small scale in November 1917 when the Germans counterattacked successfully at Cambrai. The Allies themselves,

and in particular French forces, had used such infantry tactics in their offensives since 1916, thereafter incorporating new weapons such as tanks (which the Germans lacked) and aircraft into an increasingly mechanised system of warfare.

All armies’ tactics depended on overwhelming artillery firepower: how the German system differed from the Allies was in its use of a relatively short, surprise and paralysing hurricane bombardment developed by the artillery expert Georg Bruchmüller in battles on the Eastern Front. The bombardment of high-explosive and gas shells, which on 21 March had seven separate phases and would roll forwards and backwards across the Allied positions, would target headquarters and communications as well as field defences, thereby paralysing the enemy’s command and control system just long enough for the lightly armed and fast-moving storm troops to break into the enemy’s defences and push through into the enemy’s rear areas. Supporting infantry formations would then overwhelm surviving centres of enemy resistance, giving the Germans control of the whole battlefield.

The counterpoint to such tactics was defence in depth, as the Germans had demonstrated in the Third Battle of Ypres in autumn 1917. Fifth Army had reorganised its front into three defensive zones. Machine guns would be deployed in the lightly held forward zone to break up the enemy’s initial assault. The battle zone behind, in which the main fighting would take place, consisted of

a number of mutually supporting strongpoints. Behind that was the rear zone, where reserves were held beyond enemy artillery range, ready to counterattack and regain any lost ground once the enemy’s assault formations had been broken up.

While theoretically sensible, in the event Fifth Army failed to hold its battle zone. It has been variously suggested that the new defensive tactics were not properly understood by those who had to implement them, that the defences themselves were unfinished and therefore too weak and that they were undermanned, making an effective defence impossible. Whatever the reason for Fifth Army’s defeat, it was ironically Germans adapting Allied offensive tactics effectively and British troops failing to master German defensive methods that produced the crisis in March 1918.

German storm troops advancing







**ABOVE** A marching column of German reserves cross the old Somme battlefield near Albert. Such columns were good targets for Allied ground-attack aircraft

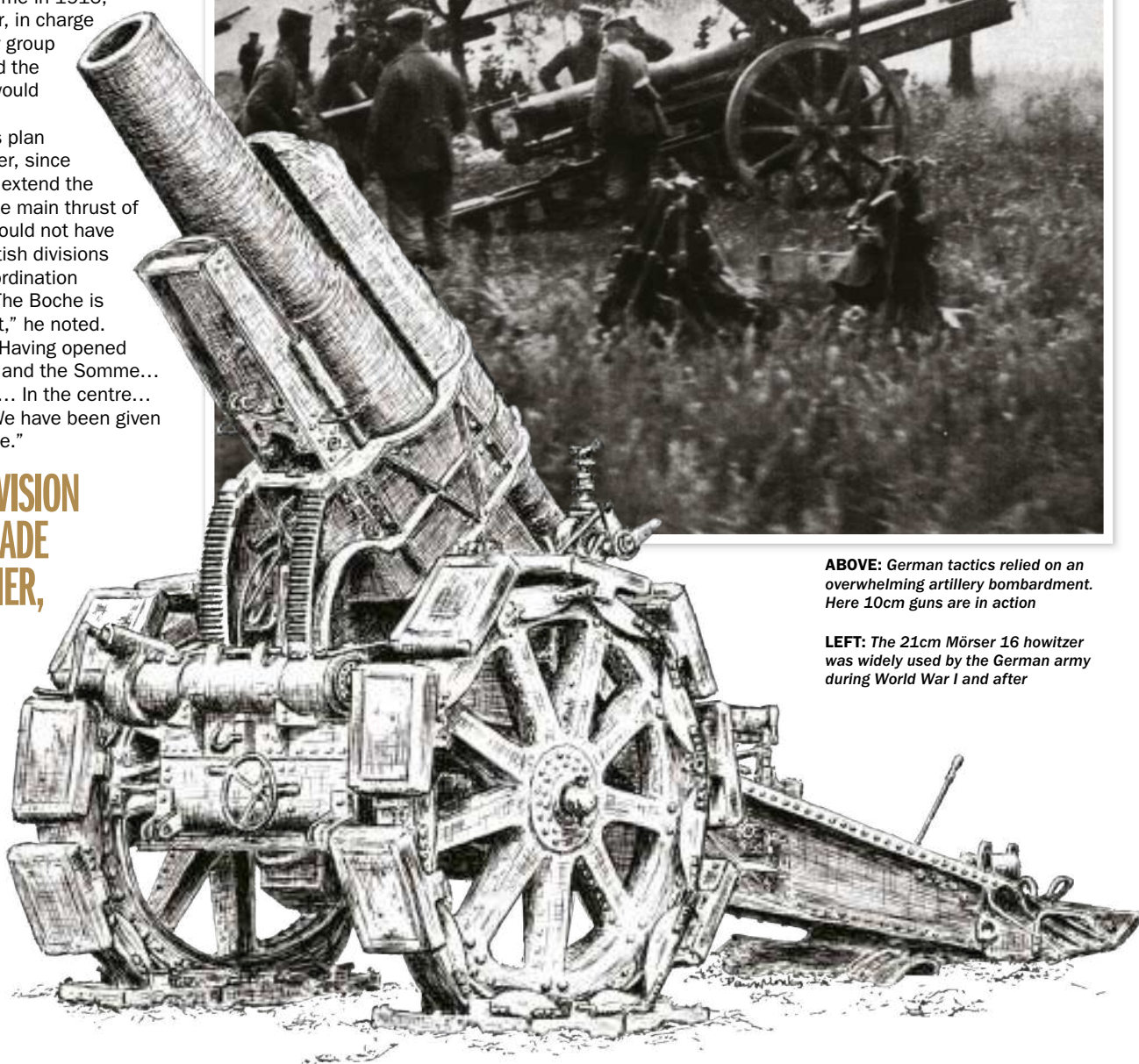
disgraceful... Haig was saying that he could not move away from his bases and... Pétain was alleging that his army had to cover Paris, that he could not scatter it, and that between the two of them a breach was opening to let the Boches through," he later told his wife. Fayolle, who had worked with Foch on the Somme in 1916, would be his field commander, in charge of a new French reserve army group moving up from the south and the remnants of Fifth Army that would seal the breach.

Ludendorff's revision of his plan had made Fayolle's task easier, since his forces would only have to extend the French left flank to oppose the main thrust of the German attack, and he would not have to intermingle French and British divisions – with all the problems of coordination that would inevitably bring. "The Boche is strong, but not very intelligent," he noted. "He has made a crude error. Having opened the breach between the Oise and the Somme... he has tried to turn its flanks... In the centre... the wave has spent itself... We have been given the time to concert our riposte."

**"LUDENDORFF'S REVISION OF HIS PLAN HAD MADE FAYOLLE'S TASK EASIER, SINCE HIS FORCES WOULD ONLY HAVE TO EXTEND THE FRENCH LEFT FLANK TO OPPOSE THE MAIN THRUST OF THE GERMAN ATTACK"**



**ABOVE:** German tactics relied on an overwhelming artillery bombardment. Here 10cm guns are in action



**LEFT:** The 21cm Mörser 16 howitzer was widely used by the German army during World War I and after



*A regiment of French infantry marches to restore the front line, 30 March 1918*

*General Marie-Émile Fayolle, commander of the French reserve army group that blocked the German Spring Offensive*

## **“THIS GAIN OF GROUND – THE LARGEST IN THE WEST TO DATE – HAD COME AT THE COST OF 240,000 CASUALTIES, WHICH GERMANY COULD NOT AFFORD IN THE CLOSING STAGES OF A WAR OF ATTRITION”**

The Germans would be stopped somewhere, Foch knew, but for him it was vital that they did not reach the strategic rail junction at Amiens that linked the British and French sectors. While Fayolle's troops reconstituted the defensive line, from the south Australian divisions were moved down from the British sector in the north to link up with them. The line was re-joined and a solid defence re-established at the town of Villers-Bretonneux on 30 March, atop the last ridge in front of Amiens. The advance to the south petered out a couple of days later.

Strong but hurriedly prepared attacks on the consolidating Allied lines in the early days of April were absorbed, and Ludendorff thereafter turned his attention elsewhere. At its greatest depth the push had gained 48 kilometres (30 miles), between Moreuil and Montdidier, but this gain of ground – the largest in the west to date – had come at the cost of 240,000 casualties, which Germany could not afford in the closing stages of a war of attrition. The Allies lost 255,000, including 90,000 prisoners, and 1,300 guns. As Gunner Harold Coulter wrote home in early April, “We are not beaten, if we are well bent. Old Fritz is beaten. I think it has been his dying kick, which you know is always more powerful than any other... He said he would be in Paris by 1 April. Good April fool for him when he found himself mile upon miles away.”

Ludendorff's gamble had not paid off, due partly to the inevitable dynamic of offensive operations in trench warfare, in which attackers tired and defenders consolidated with fresh reserves, but also due to a bold, well-coordinated and well-led Allied response. Ludendorff would kick again, if less powerfully: four more German offensives were to follow before midsummer

and the pattern was repeated in each. What Ludendorff failed to appreciate, and Foch grasped, was that the nature of warfare had changed since 1914: what appeared initially to be a breakthrough was nothing of the sort, and a single blow, however large and effective, would not bring decisive victory.

*British soldiers lie dead in their trench after the Spring Offensive forced Fifth Army to retreat*





After 'Operation Michael' was halted in front of Amiens in early April 1918, General Erich Ludendorff would continue to rain blows on the Allied lines – four in all between April and mid-July. The first of these, 'Operation Georgette', struck against the British Second and First Armies to the south of the Ypres salient on 9 April, pushing back but not breaking the line around the town. 'Operation Blücher', which commenced on 27 May, overwhelmed Allied forces on the Chemin des Dames and saw German troops reaching the River Marne, which they had last crossed in 1914, before they were halted on its banks. 'Operation Gneisenau', from 9-15 June, pushed back French forces between Montdidier and Noyon but was soon successfully counterattacked. The final offensive, 'Marneschutz-Reims', launched on 15 July and attempted to break out of the Marne salient. The Germans were lured into a carefully set trap. Ludendorff's blows were powerful but ill-coordinated, the convulsions of a dying beast. His adversary, General Ferdinand Foch, understood how to contain them and how to strike back.

When Foch had been confirmed as Allied General-in-Chief in early April, British Prime Minister David Lloyd George had asked him, "Mon Général, who should I bet on, you or Ludendorff?" and Foch had replied, "Me, because Ludendorff's task is much more difficult than mine. He has to beat me, and that he cannot manage." Foch's confidence in himself was not misplaced. He was the Allies' most experienced commander and would come to gain the trust of his fellow generals as he managed the defensive battle. Equally important, he was an offensively minded general, always on the lookout for the chance to strike back at the enemy while they were off balance. Foch carefully managed Allied reserves: "You know my methods; I stick a wafer here, another there, a third at the side... The Germans make scarcely any further progress. A fourth wafer and they will stop altogether," he once explained to Louis Louchet, the French minister of munitions. He combined this with a proper understanding of the dynamics of industrial battle, which ensured he had contained the German threat by summer.

Foch's first test came in the Battle of the Lys. On 9 April the German Sixth Army, supported by 30 captured Allied tanks, launched another surprise attack south of Ypres. The main blow fell on the Portuguese Expeditionary Force, whose front collapsed. By the end of the day the Germans had penetrated 9.5 kilometres (six miles) and crossed the River Lys, although British units on the Portuguese flanks fought hard and confined the breakthrough.

The next day German Fourth Army struck a second blow against the southern flank of the Ypres salient, storming the high ground of the Messines-Wytschaete Ridge, south of Ypres. Because the attacks fell in the British sector, moving French reserves to the threatened point would be more difficult. Moreover, Foch initially judged the attack to be a feint and expected Ludendorff to renew the offensive against Amiens with a more powerful blow further south at Arras. Therefore for some days he refused British commander-in-chief Sir Douglas Haig's entreaties for French reinforcements.



German troops advance towards the River Aisne, May 1918



Haig's famous order of the day of 11 April reflected his anxieties. It stated, "Every position must be held to the last man: there must be no retirement. With our backs to the wall and believing in the justice of our cause each one of us must fight on to the end." Haig's and Foch's difference of opinion reflected their different responsibilities and viewpoints. Haig had to ensure the security of his front and the Channel ports behind it; Foch had to consider the situation along the whole Western Front. On reflection, Foch accepted the growing danger in the north. By 12 April French reserve divisions were on the move once more. 14 infantry and three cavalry divisions would be sent, but they would not enter the fight until 16 April.

Foch would keep other reserve divisions in hand for when the Germans struck at Villers-Bretonneux in front of Amiens on 24 April. To gain the time needed to deploy the French reinforcements, it was decided to withdraw the British line in front of Ypres (handing back the ground won at great cost during the Third Battle of Ypres the previous

autumn), although that town, which had been defended since 1914, would not be surrendered. The Germans tried to advance south of Ypres towards the rail junction at Hazebrouck. Foch's counter-plan was to form solid flanks to the north and south of the German penetration and deploy fresh reserves on a succession of defensive lines to slow and eventually halt the German advance.

As with Operational Michael, the German offensive ran out of steam quickly. Thereafter fighting came to focus on the high ground of Mount Kemmel, south of Ypres. A renewed attack on 25 April, covered by an intensive bombardment of high-explosive and gas shells, blasted French troops off the hill, but the dogged resistance of French and British reserves effectively blunted the

German thrust, and the offensive petered out by the end of April.

The sophisticated tactics of the first phase of an attack were increasingly abandoned as second-line divisions were thrown into the fight in an attempt to force a decision. Battles resumed the intensity and bloodiness of those of earlier years. On 29 April one British gunner officer recorded, "Throughout the whole of the northern battlefield they continued to hurl great masses of men against our line till evening. Not in a single spot did they succeed and are smashed right down the line. At times the fighting was furious and the roar and din throughout the day is beyond description. They came over in four or five waves with fixed bayonets. Very few got back." It was a

**"LUDENDORFF'S TASK IS MUCH MORE DIFFICULT THAN MINE. HE HAS TO BEAT ME, AND THAT HE CANNOT MANAGE"**

— Allied General-in-Chief Ferdinand Foch





human sacrifice that the German army could not afford at this late stage of the war.

Ludendorff's next blow fell against the Chemin des Dames ridge above the River Aisne, recaptured by the French army in autumn 1917. Here French Sixth Army commander General Denis Duchêne had refused to adopt the most recent defence-in-depth methods, not wishing to give up the strategic high ground that it had cost so many lives to capture. Not expecting an attack in that sector, French commander-in-chief Philippe Pétain had not pressed his subordinate.

The German hurricane bombardment, which opened on 27 May, fell on densely held front lines, some of which were held by depleted British divisions that had been moved to the sector to recuperate after facing the earlier German blows. "What a dreadful...bombardment," one French survivor wrote home, "The poor division... there's nothing left. As for the regiment, while we've been in the line 2,000 men have been reduced to just over 200." Pockets of shell-shocked survivors could not hope to stem the German advance, and there was no intensive resistance behind the front to match that of March and April because local reserves were destroyed in

the early phase of the battle. Duchêne, who was quickly relieved of his command, had not taken the precaution to prepare the bridges over the River Aisne for demolition or to defend them with reserve formations, so once through the Allied front positions the German troops could advance quickly and relatively unopposed.

Foch now faced his greatest challenge – where and how could he stop the German advance, and with what? The decision was taken to strip the French front of reserve divisions and to redeploy the French forces supporting the British in Flanders and Picardy. British and Belgian forces would take over more of the defensive line at Ypres to free French reserves. Newly formed American divisions would also be sent into the line. Once again this would take time, but Foch appreciated that the momentum of the German advance would slow.

**"POCKETS OF SHELL-SHOCKED SURVIVORS COULD NOT HOPE TO STEM THE GERMAN ADVANCE"**



**ABOVE:** An Allied command post on Mount Kemmel. This photo was taken on 23 April, two days before the Germans seized the hill

**RIGHT:** British soldiers man a road barricade in Bailleul on 15 April 1918 during the Battle of the Lys. The town fell shortly after

## LUDENDORFF VERSUS FOCH

1918 saw two master strategists try to find the key to victory

Generals Erich Ludendorff and Ferdinand Foch were two of the best commanders of the war. Both had extensive experience when they faced off in 1918. Ludendorff had learned modern tactics and battle planning on the Eastern Front, when he was chief of staff to General Paul von Hindenburg from 1914 to 1916.

When Hindenburg became Germany's commander-in-chief in September 1916 Ludendorff assumed the new role of first quartermaster general, responsible for German strategy and military operations. Ludendorff found adapting to the material-intensive warfare of the Western Front difficult after fighting the Russians. His first decision was to assume a more defensive posture, since Germany's armies were suffering heavily in the dual battles of attrition at Verdun and the Somme.

In spring 1917 he conducted a strategic retreat to newly built defence-in-depth positions – the Hindenburg Line – with a view to avoiding a further bloodletting like that of 1916. Foch had directed the Somme offensive, and from that experience he came to appreciate that the war would only be decided by a cumulative process of attrition carried out on such a scale and at such a rate that the enemy could not reconstitute their beaten formations. To that extent Foch saw the enemy's manpower to be the principal target of strategy, although morale, material and logistics were other factors that had to be considered. He would not let his armies, whose own morale was shaky after 1917's battles, bleed themselves white in long attritional battles in the

future. To deliver this strategy, appropriate tactics and operational methods – which Foch dubbed 'scientific battle' – had been developed on the battlefield in 1915 and 1916.

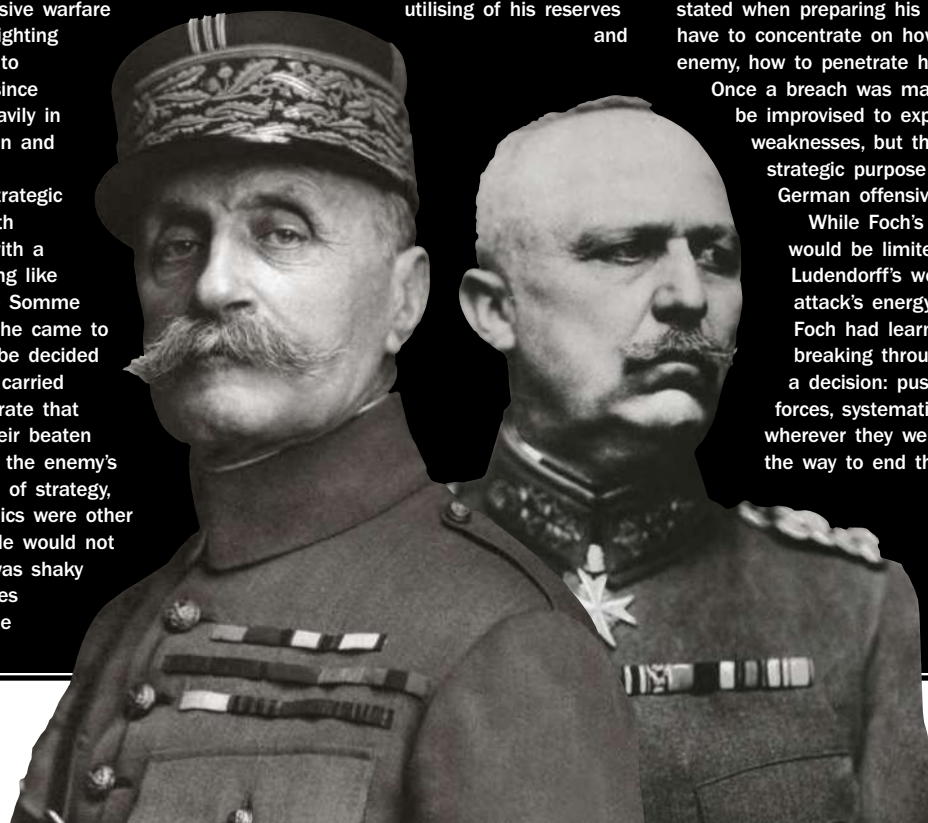
By 1918 large battles could be organised quickly and with the expectation of success, at least in their initial stages. Foch therefore planned, when the opportunity presented itself, to use a sequence of powerful, coordinated offensives all along the Western Front to break Germany's fighting power once and for all: "To embarrass the enemy in the utilising of his reserves and

not allow him sufficient time to fill up his units" as Foch explained to the Allied commanders-in-chief in July 1918. It was his understanding of the operational level of war – the use of battles to achieve pre-determined strategic ends – that gave Foch the advantage.

Once he launched his 'general battle' in summer 1918 it was his intention that it would continue until one or the other side was exhausted. In contrast, Ludendorff's methods lacked sophistication. "We talk too much about operations and too little about tactics", Ludendorff stated when preparing his offensive. "All measures have to concentrate on how to defeat the enemy, how to penetrate his front positions."

Once a breach was made, the battle would be improvised to exploit emerging enemy weaknesses, but there was no overriding strategic purpose in the choice of German offensives.

While Foch's individual battles would be limited in time and space, Ludendorff's would continue until the attack's energy had been contained. Foch had learned in 1916 that breaking through would not produce a decision: pushing back the enemy's forces, systematically destroying them wherever they were encountered, was the way to end the war.



**Foch (left) and Ludendorff (right) were both highly capable and experienced commanders after years of war**







*The battlefield of the Lys at St Eloi, photographed from the air after the German bombardment*

**“WHEN LUDENDORFF LAUNCHED HIS FINAL OFFENSIVE IN THE MARNE ON 15 JULY, COMMITTING THREE ARMIES WITH 48 DIVISIONS AND 6,353 GUNS IN AN ATTEMPT TO FORCE A DECISION, FOCH WAS WELL PREPARED TO MEET IT”**

The line of the River Marne through Château-Thierry was a natural obstacle that could be held. Here French and American forces consolidated a new defensive line, which checked the German advance. Meeting the Blücher Offensive had been a real test of Foch's authority over the other Allied generals, but he had managed to hold his nerve and use his powers of persuasion to organise a coalition defence. From that point onwards he had effective control of all Allied reserves, not just those of France.

The next German blow, to the west of the new Marne salient, was considerably weaker than the earlier ones: Ludendorff's own reserves were being used up in a series of increasingly attritional battles. German forces were drawn over the River Matz by General Georges Humbert's Third Army, which gave ground rather than lose men, and were then counterattacked in strength on their right flank by General Charles Mangin's Tenth Army on 11 June, after the Germans had spent their strength in the offensive. Mangin surprised the Germans with a new offensive method. There was no French preliminary bombardment, but instead his attacking infantry were supported by a creeping barrage and large numbers of medium tanks and ground-support aircraft. A second German blow from the western flank of the Marne salient on 12 June stalled, its momentum absorbed by French defence-in-depth. The offensive was effectively over within a week and was a clear Allied victory.

When Ludendorff launched his final offensive in the Marne on 15 July, committing three armies with 48 divisions and 6,353 guns in an attempt to force a decision, Foch was well prepared to meet it. East of Reims the momentum of the attack across the bleak Champagne battlefields

of 1915 was easily absorbed by a well organised defence-in-depth. Rudolf Binding endured a hellish day in extreme heat: “No shade, no paths, not even roads; just crumbling white streaks on a flat plain... Into this the French deliberately lured us. They put up no resistance in front; they had neither infantry nor artillery in this forward battle-zone... Our guns bombarded empty trenches; our gas-shells gassed empty artillery positions; only in little hidden folds of the ground, sparsely distributed, lay machine-gun posts, like lice in the seams and folds of a garment, to give the attacking force a warm reception. After uninterrupted fighting from five o'clock in the morning until the night... we only succeed in advancing about three kilometres [1.8 miles]... We did not see a single dead Frenchman, let alone a captured gun or machine-gun, and we had suffered heavy losses.”

West of Reims the initial attack fared better, with six German divisions establishing a bridgehead across the River Marne at Dormans. But the bridgehead, overlooked by Allied artillery positions, proved a death trap. French and American troops on the heights overlooking the Marne valley held the blow long enough for Foch to strike back with a pre-planned counterattack on the western flank of the Marne salient. A battle that had been promoted to the German troops as the ‘victory offensive’ – the final decisive thrust – ended in a general withdrawal back to the River Vesle as Foch's forces caved in the Marne salient.

These were large and costly battles, on a scale not seen on the Western Front since 1914. Between April and July the Germans had lost 326,000 and the Allies 386,000 troops, as well as vast amounts of equipment. Foch had won the first round of the campaign because his defensive methods were appropriate and

*The River Marne presented a strong natural barrier to the German advance, especially once the bridges were destroyed*



adaptable while Ludendorff's offensive tactics were repetitive and predictable. Foch had lived up to his boast to Lloyd George, although, as he remarked at the time, it was one thing to stop the Germans and quite another to beat them. On the efforts of the spring and early summer, however, Allied victory would be founded and achieved before the year was out. Once allowed free reign to take the offensive himself, Foch would demonstrate that his armies were just as effective as Ludendorff's and that his superior understanding of operations would give him the edge against his foe.

As summer passed on the Western Front, fortunes were to change. The blows that had been raining on the British and French fronts since March were weakening, while Allied resources were growing. Prompted to accelerate the dispatch of men to Europe as the military crisis escalated, American forces were now gathering in large numbers and starting to





*German attacks, while usually successful, resulted in heavy casualties among the best German assault troops*

*The French army's St Chamond medium tank, used to support the successful counterattack on the River Matz in June*

enter the battle. The numerical advantage the Germans had enjoyed in the spring after their peace with Bolshevik Russia had disappeared, and their troops were tiring after four months of hard fighting. Although French and British troops were also tired, they had grown in confidence. They had held the enemy onslaught, and the active defence Foch conducted had shown them that they were capable of halting the Germans and striking blows in their turn. Foch always had in mind a bigger counterattack, one that would exploit the inherent weaknesses in Ludendorff's flailing blows to reverse the fortunes of war. The Second Battle of the Marne in late July would prove there was more fight left in the enemy, which Ludendorff claimed was about to break.

The thrust and counter-thrust on the battlefields of the Western Front in 1918 masked a more fundamental issue. The home fronts of both sides had been gripped by weariness after three and a half years of war and, after the example furnished by Russia, there was concern whether they would hold while the armies fought things to a conclusion. French and British soldiers and civilians would respond positively to the crisis. Frenchmen had not defended their national soil since 1914 only to lose it at the end. Their premier, Georges Clemenceau, tapped into their patriotism: "My foreign policy and my home policy are the same. At home I wage war, abroad I wage war...I shall go on waging war." British workers happily sacrificed their holidays to manufacture the munitions needed by their hard-pressed army. Even Italy, badly shocked by the Battle of Caporetto in autumn 1917, had largely recovered by mid-1918 and was able to send an army corps to reinforce the Western Front.

**"WE DID NOT SEE A SINGLE DEAD FRENCHMAN, LET ALONE A CAPTURED GUN OR MACHINE-GUN, AND WE HAD SUFFERED HEAVY LOSSES"**

In Germany, however, the situation was more desperate, with an Allied blockade reducing the people to near-starvation and growing political unrest in the face of a strengthening military dictatorship on the home front. German politician Kurt Riezler recognised that "all depends on the offensive... should it not succeed there will come a severe moral crisis which probably none of the present government leaders has the talent to master effectively."

In the spring, Ludendorff had staked the German Empire's political future on a victory. Yet when his hungry soldiers fell voraciously on well-stocked Allied supply depots, it became clear to them that the high command had misled them, and that the Allies were not, in fact, starving too. When Foch's counter-stroke on the Marne obliged Ludendorff, himself in an increasing state of nervous exhaustion, to announce to his troops in early August that his so-called 'peace offensive' had failed and that the army was resuming the defensive, he was effectively admitting that the war was lost and that it was only a matter of time before Germany would be forced to make terms.

Ludendorff's admission was the consequence of a fundamental shift in the strategic position at the end of July 1918. Previously on the defensive, the Allies had struck back with a sudden and overwhelming counterattack against the final German offensive, which tried to cross



the River Marne and expand the salient created by their May offensive, 'Operation Blücher'.

Foch appreciated that salients were inherently vulnerable, with flanks that could be broken and exposed lines of communication. If he could absorb the energy of the next German attack at the apex of the salient then he could catch the enemy off balance and strike at these vulnerabilities. He would use General Charles Mangin's Tenth Army that had mounted the successful counterattack on the River Matz in June, reinforced by two large and fresh American divisions (First and Second) to attack the right (western) flank of the salient.

This would be the first time that US troops participated in a large-scale offensive, and Mangin ensured that their inexperience would be offset by close support from veteran French

formations, including the Moroccan Division and the Régiment de Marche of the Foreign Legion – the most decorated units that the French army had to offer.

As well as the usual powerful support from artillery and aircraft and over 200 medium tanks, the French would be using their new Renault FT17 light tanks en masse for the first time. Armed with either a 37mm gun or a machine gun in a revolving turret, and capable of matching the infantry's speed of advance, this new weapon provided a means for rapid forward exploitation once the crust of the enemy's defence had been pierced. As it was, the flanks of the salient were relatively thinly held and the German field defences were not as elaborate as those that had faced Allied offensives in previous years, so Mangin anticipated that once he attacked he

could advance rapidly on the enemy's railway communications centre at Soissons.

The 'Marneschutz-Reims' offensive, which began on 15 July, had been going on for several days and had spent its early momentum when Mangin's counterattack, the Battle of Soissons, was launched on 18 July. Elsewhere around the salient other Allied divisions – French, British, US and Italian – engaged the enemy to hold them while Mangin's blow, supported by General Jean-Marie Degoutte's Sixth Army on its right, smashed in the salient's right flank between the River Aisne and Belleau.

Mangin was able to concentrate his forces secretly in the extensive woods of Villers-Cotterêts: an overnight storm drowned out the sound of advancing tanks. The French achieved complete surprise by opening the bombardment

*French army machine gunners take up position on the Marne battlefield*









at the same time as the infantry attack began. At 4.40am, masses of US and French infantry, supported by French tanks, surged forwards in a thick mist that shrouded their approach, and overwhelmed the thinly held German defences.

The first morning saw rapid progress as the enemy was caught off balance: at its deepest, the US Second Division advanced seven kilometres (4.3 miles). Once the attack had passed the frontline trenches, hundreds of Renault FT17s, which had been held in reserve to exploit the initial break-in, were sent forwards to wreak havoc in the German rear areas during the long summer day. Only the fact that the German positions were dissected by deep ravines, in which the light tanks could not operate, gave the defenders opportunities to regroup and organise their resistance.

As with all offensives, by the afternoon the momentum of the assault was slowing, as attacking troops tired and German reserves were deployed. Attempts to follow up over the following days had more limited success. The tanks, now used in small units rather than en masse, suffered heavy losses as the enemy's field artillery was deployed to engage them, and only localised gains were made.

Nevertheless, Mangin's blow had achieved the desired result. The railway junction at Soissons came within range of French artillery fire, and Ludendorff ordered a general withdrawal from the salient, fearing his forces would be trapped and annihilated. He did so with reluctance, suggesting he was growing increasingly out of touch with the military situation. His subordinates pressed him to retreat, justifying

their view with reports of collapsing morale and increasing rates of desertion among their troops.

Ludendorff himself still believed the army had the strength and motivation to counterattack. In the Battle of Tardenois from 20 July, Italian and British troops attached to French Fifth Army attempted to penetrate the left (eastern) flank of the salient along the valley of the River Ardre but were met with fierce resistance, as the Germans struggled to prevent the Allied noose closing around the troops withdrawing from their centre. In the last week of July the salient was pulled back as the Germans tried to establish a new line along the River Ourcq. Mangin's army attacked again on 1 August. Although there was less success against a reinforced German line than on 20 July, the attack put enough pressure on the enemy to make them shorten their line

## THE AEF ENTERS THE BATTLE

American forces would take time to adapt to the intensive fighting on the Western Front

Although America had declared war in April 1917, a year later its army still existed largely on paper. Two divisions, formed from regular forces and some National Guard units, were in France when the German offensive opened, but under strict instructions from President Woodrow Wilson to build a national army, their commander, General John Pershing, had resisted all calls for his troops to be integrated into Allied formations.

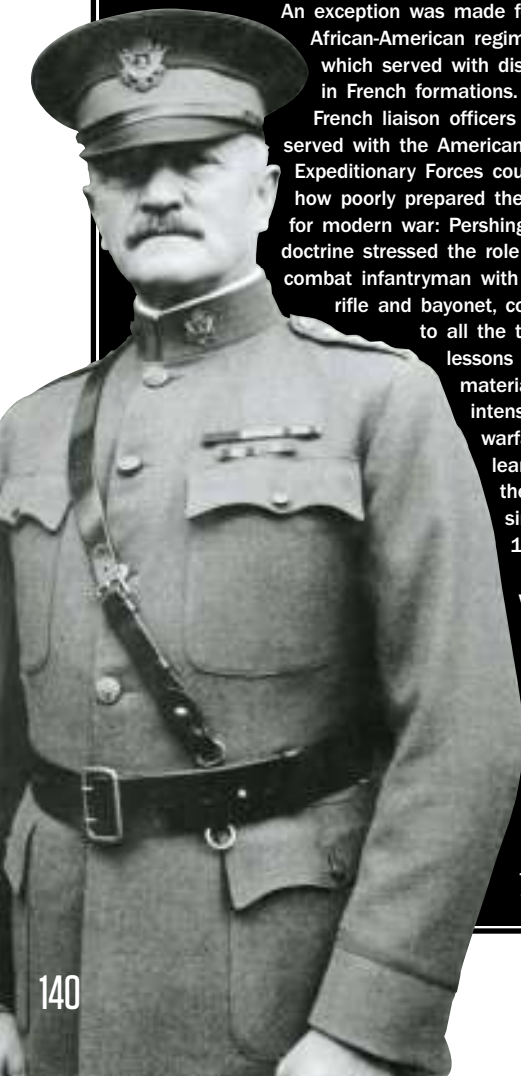
An exception was made for African-American regiments, which served with distinction in French formations. The French liaison officers who served with the American Expeditionary Forces could see how poorly prepared they were for modern war: Pershing's doctrine stressed the role of the combat infantryman with his rifle and bayonet, counter to all the tactical lessons of material-intensive warfare learned by the Allies since 1914. This was to be

demonstrated in early engagements, such as that of the Second Division at Belleau Wood in June, where US Marine and regular army battalions threw themselves repeatedly at German defensive positions with inadequate artillery support, in a battle that reminded French observers of the bloodbaths their own troops had endured in the past. In response to the German onslaught, it was agreed in conference at Abbeville on 2 May that American troops would come to France not as formed, equipped and trained divisions but piecemeal, infantry and machine gunners first. Units would be equipped from Allied stocks and trained behind the Allied lines, taking up defensive positions in the American sector in Lorraine in order to free up French forces for the battle. Over 1.5 million US soldiers came to France thereafter.

But it was one thing to have men, another to create an effective fighting army. There were 25 formed US divisions in France by the time of the Second Battle of the Marne, each about twice the strength of an Allied division, but few had seen combat of any sort and all needed training and battle experience. A few units had fought

with Allied forces. In late May, 28th regiment of First US Division had taken the village of Cantigny in the AEF's first offensive action. But they had depended on French artillery and tank support for success. More American divisions were engaged on the Marne, where they gained a reputation that was not really justified by their military achievements: the French made a point of supporting all American forces closely, while ensuring that their actions were emphasised in the Allied press for morale purposes.

Five divisions in all took part in the Second Battle of the Marne, and fought with enthusiasm if not great skill. Still, as the army expanded and improved, American forces would play an increasing part in the Allied counterattack. Two American armies were eventually formed. The First Army, with support from French Second Army, recaptured the St Mihiel salient east of Verdun in mid-September. Both American armies would take part in the Meuse-Argonne offensive, September-November 1918, on the extreme right of Foch's armies pushing the Germans out of France and Belgium.



General John Pershing



American troops march through a damaged French village during their advance from the River Marne





Blinded French soldiers are led away from the Second Battle of the Marne after being gassed

again. The front stabilised along the line of the rivers Aisne and Vesle. Soissons was liberated and Paris was no longer threatened.

Within three weeks, Allied troops had driven the Germans from the Marne salient, recovering much of the ground lost since May and inflicting heavy casualties – around 168,000. In particular, the large number of prisoners taken – almost 30,000 – indicated that the fight was going out of the enemy's troops. The Second Battle of the Marne was an Allied success without precedent and demonstrated that the tide had now turned. But it did not necessarily mean that the war would end quickly.

The German army that returned to the defensive was still powerful – it had demonstrated its defensive prowess for three years between 1915 and 1917 – although its fighting power had been seriously depleted in its own offensive operations. The Spanish flu pandemic, which reached France in the spring and was ravaging the German army come July, would also take a heavy toll on the weakened German soldiers.

In an attritional war, who could fill the ranks for the longest would ultimately determine the outcome, and by this point German reserves were in short supply. The new recruits of the 1919 class were already at the front and the only other source of reserves was recovered wounded men and 'comb-outs' from the rear areas – men previously classified as unfit for frontline service. Moreover, morale was weakening and there was a growing problem of desertion and shirking in the army's rear areas.

The Allies were running short of men too. Facing manpower shortages, British divisions had been reorganised from 12 to nine infantry battalions over the winter of 1917–18 and, under pressure in the spring, the age of frontline service for conscripts had been reduced from 19 to 18 and a half. In a sign of political instability as the military crisis deepened in the spring, Prime Minister David Lloyd George had to face criticism in parliament that he'd deliberately starved the army of men to restrain Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig's attacking tendencies. For the Allies, however, American 'Doughboys' in ever growing numbers would redress manpower shortages if they could be made fighting

## “GERMAN RESERVES WERE IN SHORT SUPPLY. THE NEW RECRUITS OF THE 1919 CLASS WERE ALREADY AT THE FRONT”

efficient. The first formed divisions had fought on the Marne with enthusiasm if limited skill, but once properly trained and led they would become a huge asset.

The Allies' other asset was Foch, who was awarded his marshal's baton at the end of the Second Battle of the Marne, in which he had demonstrated his control of all Allied forces. Through the difficult spring and early summer the generalissimo had been awaiting the moment when he could strike back with effect. Now that he had regained the initiative he intended to press his advantage. In late summer and autumn 1918 Foch would rain his own series of blows all along the Western Front. His strategy was based

on a careful assessment of the relative size and fighting capacity of the opposing armies. He knew that with American assistance his forces would increase in strength, while Ludendorff's could only shrink.

Now that the counter-offensive was underway it had to continued almost without respite so that Ludendorff had no time to rest and refit his broken divisions. Even as the battle on the Marne was winding down, Foch had been preparing his next masterful blow, which would strike in front of Amiens on 8 August 1918, Ludendorff's infamous 'black day of the German army', from which Foch's general offensive rolled on to victory in three months.



French and British troops wait to go forward during the Second Battle of the Marne

Images: Alamy, Getty | Illustration: Dawn Monks [www.dawnmonksillustrations.co.uk](http://www.dawnmonksillustrations.co.uk)



1918

# SECOND BATTLE OF THE MARNE

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15 JULY - 6 AUGUST 1918

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The last major German offensive on the Western Front during World War I resulted in a major defeat, inviting an Allied counteroffensive



*French 75mm field guns in operation during the Second Battle of the Marne*



In the spring of 1918, German General Erich Ludendorff recognised the perilous position his forces maintained on the Western Front. World War I had entered its fourth year of fierce fighting, and German resources were stretched thin and choked by an effective British blockade of ports of entry. American troops were gathering in France at an alarming pace, and Ludendorff concluded that the time had come to strike a war-winning, if not desperate, blow.

In March, German troops began executing a series of five offensive operations designed to win the victory; however, in turn, each of the first four had failed after only modest initial gains. The final effort, a strike into Flanders, was to be preceded by attacks east and west of the French river town of Reims along the Marne, a scene of heavy fighting in the early days of the war. Ludendorff believed that the French could be engaged on the Marne to the extent that their troops were pinned down and unable to transfer to Flanders when the main German effort was unleashed.

On 15 July, the First and Third Armies, 23 divisions, under Generals Bruno von Mudra and Karl von Einem, hit the French Fourth Army, led by General Henri Gouraud, east of Reims. To the west, 17 divisions of the German Seventh and Ninth Armies, under Generals Max von Boehn and Johannes von Eben, struck the French Sixth Army, commanded by General Jean Degoutte. Separate engagements resulted in the east at the Fourth Battle of Champagne and in the west at the Battle of the Mountain of Reims. Both engagements were part of the larger Second Battle of the Marne.

The German strategy was to rupture the Allied defensive line at the junction points where French armies met. Along with the French were 85,000 American troops, many of them from the 42nd, 28th and 3rd Infantry Divisions, along with elements of the British Expeditionary Force primarily occupying positions in Flanders to the northwest. The Allies watched the Germans marshal their forces, and during the weeks leading up to the renewal of enemy operations

they became keenly aware of its coming. French aerial reconnaissance had noted German troop concentrations, and trench raids had yielded nearly 30 prisoners. From these captives the Allies learned not only the date, but also the time of day when the offensive was to begin. They were well prepared to receive the offensive.

East of Reims, the French defense in depth included a series of trenches placed forward but only lightly defended. These trenches would absorb the fury of the German preliminary artillery bombardment and the deadly shells of mustard gas that would accompany the high explosives. Enemy infiltrators or shock troops would find little opposition and spend their energy quickly.

The main French line of defence was located four or five kilometres (two or three miles) behind the forward entrenchments. French trenches and strongpoints were positioned on the reverse slope of high ground and rendered invisible to German artillery observers some distance away. The French maintained a steady fire from all their own artillery





positions when the attack commenced to extend the illusion of a full firepower commitment to their forward positions.

The German Marne-Reims Offensive was scheduled to step off at 12.10pm on the 15th. When the French artillery began to bark at 11.30am, 40 minutes earlier, even the German rank and file felt a sinking feeling that its plans had been undone. Their fears eased somewhat when they encountered only token resistance among the French trenches east of Reims, and a rolling artillery barrage continued to precede their advance. Here and there the Germans were slowed to deal with a strongpoint or obstacle placed to slow the forward momentum.

When they finally reached the main line of French resistance, the German troops were fatigued from their march and ordered to rest while their field guns were rolled to within range of the Allied line. The advance halted for the night.

At 8.30am on the morning of the 16th, the Germans renewed their attack a full hour behind schedule. The French artillerymen were waiting and stopped the advance in its tracks amid a torrent of shells. The Germans fell back, regrouped and attempted another advance at noon. Again, they were stopped cold. Although the French mounted a counterattack they fared little better than their adversaries had earlier in the day. Still, it was enough to dissuade the Germans from another offensive attempt of their own, and this sector of the battlefield fell silent. Ludendorff's diversion east of Reims had ended in failure.

The stalwart French Fourth Army was now holding its line and able to shift reinforcements to the threatened western sector where the Germans had experienced greater success with their initial assaults. Here, along the south bank of the Marne, the Germans had opened their offensive

with a three-hour bombardment that pounded the defenders in their trenches and dugouts. Gas shells were interspersed with the explosives, and the toxic brew seeped into low-lying areas. Soldiers donned gas masks, but those who were not quick enough gagged and coughed and were quickly evacuated to aid stations.

The Germans were required to cross the Marne to get at the French defenders and used boats of every description to transit the waterway. Engineers struggled under fire to erect bridges while storm troopers, superb shock troops, went after the nearest French entrenchments as soon as they could exit their boats. As daylight faded, the Germans had managed to claw out a bridgehead 6.4 kilometres (four miles) deep and 14 kilometres (nine miles) wide on either side of the small village of Dormans.

When he heard the news, Ludendorff was hopeful for success and called the lodgment "the very pinnacle of military victory!" The Germans withstood French artillery and machine-gun fire while French bombers dropped ordnance on the bridges, the bombs' detonations spewing shrapnel in all directions. They held on doggedly to their hard-won ground between the towns of Epernay and Chateau Thierry. The French commanders had fed the untried companies of the American 28th Infantry Division into the melee piecemeal to fight alongside their allies and earn their baptism of fire. The 42nd Infantry Division had suffered its share of casualties in the day's fighting as well, while the

British XXII Corps came up in support, helping stall the German advance within 48 hours.

The 38th Infantry Regiment of the US 3rd Division made an epic stand against the German push, and during the tough fighting on 15-17 July 1917, the entire division earned the nickname that it carries to this day – 'Rock of the Marne'.

Under the command of Colonel Ulysses Grant McAlexander, the 38th Regiment's battalions were deployed in mutually supporting positions from the riverbank and in reserve. Major Guy Rowe's 2nd Battalion defended the river line as two platoons were dug in close to the water's edge while two were positioned 300 metres (970 feet) to the rear along the embankment of the Metz-Paris rail line.

Captain Jesse Woolridge of the 2nd Battalion was immersed in the tide of combat and remembered: "At 3.30am their general fire (artillery) ceased, and their creeping barrage started – behind which at 40 yards only, mind you, they came – with more machine guns than I thought the German army owned..."

The fighting was ferocious and in many places hand to hand. American soldiers grappled in death struggles with their German enemies, and Woolridge witnessed a frantic convergence of the opposing forces. "The enemy had to battle their way through the first platoon on the river bank," he wrote. "Then they took on the second platoon on the forward edge of the railway where we had a thousand times the best of it – but the Germans gradually wiped it out. My third platoon took their

## "AMERICAN SOLDIERS GRAPPLED IN DEATH STRUGGLES WITH THEIR GERMAN ENEMIES, AND WOOLRIDGE WITNESSED A FRANTIC CONVERGENCE OF THE OPPOSING FORCES"

*French tanks advances during the Second Battle of the Marne*







French infantrymen, blinded by gassing, are escorted by a British soldier

place in desperate hand to hand fighting, in which some got through only to be picked up by the fourth platoon which was deployed simultaneously with the third [...] By the time they struck the fourth platoon, they were all in and easy prey."

Ludendorff assessed the situation after his diversionary offensive had played out. "...It proved impossible for us to move the right apex of our line to the south of the Marne [...] The check we thus received was one result of the stupendous fighting between our 10th Division of infantry and American troops."

The Americans were soldiers of the 3rd Infantry Division, the Rock of the Marne, who along with their French and British allies halted the last gambit of the German Army on the Western Front. Three French armies counterattacked on 18 July to reduce the German salient across the Marne. By 4 August, they had routed the Germans, advancing 50 kilometres (30 miles) and taking 25,000 prisoners. Casualties had been heavy in three weeks of combat. The French suffered 95,000 killed and wounded, the British 13,000, the Americans 12,000, and the Germans an irreplaceable 168,000.

The Second Battle of the Marne set the stage for the ensuing Hundred Days Offensive that began on 8 August and finally brought the horror of World War I to a close on 11 November 1918.

# SECOND BATTLE OF MARNE

The final major German offensive

## 1. FINAL OFFENSIVE

The Germans began an offensive push along the Marne River. Their plan was to beat the British Expeditionary Force in an advancement through Flanders with the Marne being a diversionary tactic.

## 2. FIRST ATTACK

At the section of river to the east of the city of Reims, the French Fourth army, as well as the US 42nd Division which was attached to it, was attacked by German forces.

## 3. SECOND ATTACK

To the west of Reims, a second German attack was mounted at the same time as the first. Battling against the French Sixth army were 17 divisions of the German 7th Army with help from the Ninth. This was the Battle of the Mountain of Reims.

## 4. FIGHT BACK

The French Fourth Army proved too strong for the Germans and the attack to the east of Reims was halted. However, the Germans were more successful to the west and managed to cross the river.

## 5. FALSE TRENCHES

To the surprise of the Germans west of Reims, the French had dug lightly used trenches. The gunfire had been largely pointless because the real trenches were further back. On 17 July 1918, with help from British and US troops, the Germans were held.

## 6. COUNTER-ATTACK

On 18 July 1918, the Allied forces hit back. Around 350 Renault FT tanks met the Germans together with 24 French divisions and other Allied troops, pushing the Germans back.

## 7. FULL RETREAT

On 20 July 1918, with the Germans having lost all ground made that entire year, they retreated. They also scrapped the Flanders assault. It was to be a turning point for the war.

## 8. FINISHING OFF

Although the Germans dug in, the Allies continued to attack and push the Germans back. By 6 August 1918, around 45km (28mi) had been gained and the Germans were well and truly on the back foot.

**GERMAN 70% ALLIES**

**Main weapon used:** Tanks

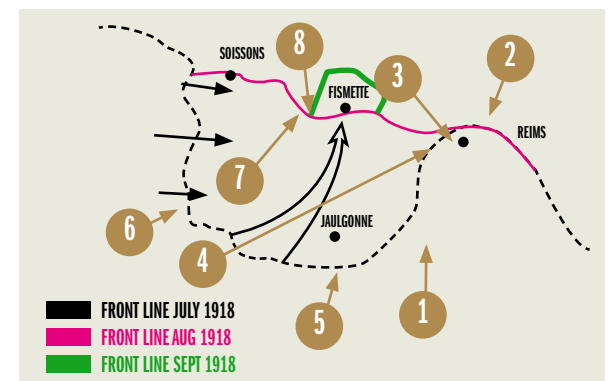
**German casualties:** 168,000

**Allied casualties:** 120,000

**Did you know?** Around 30,000 Americans were killed in the Second Battle of the Marne – the first time the USA had suffered such heavy casualties



ABOVE This picture is from the First battle of Marne





# BATTLE OF AMIENS

8-11 AUGUST 1918

**B**y the summer of 1918, the German Army was, according to senior commander General Erich Ludendorff: “depressed down to Hell.” The last great German offensive of World War I had ground to a halt that spring, while supply shortages and civil unrest at home seemed to conspire in a scenario of doom. For the Allies, American troops were finally reaching the battlefield in great numbers, bolstering efforts to bring the war to a victorious conclusion. Perhaps failing to grasp the enemy’s

desperate state, Allied commanders were preparing to carry the war into 1919.

The contending armies had fought for the town of Amiens, along the River Somme in northwestern France, virtually since the beginning of hostilities in 1914. Now, the Allies might push the enemy back from the important rail centre on the line to Paris, securing the transport artery for good. Overall Allied commander Field Marshal Ferdinand Foch endorsed the effort, and British General Henry Rawlinson, commander of the British Fourth Army took charge of the offensive. At his disposal,

Rawlinson commanded 75,000 British, Canadian and Australian troops. American and French units were also slated to participate.

The British plan for the capture of Amiens appeared somewhat ambitious on the surface. Spearheads were expected to advance up to eight miles on the first day, substantially more than earlier operations had managed against stiff enemy resistance. Nevertheless, Rawlinson displayed keen command presence and prepared for the offensive with innovation. Rather than a general artillery bombardment that would give the

## ACCURATE ARTILLERY

Smoke billows from burning buildings and areas receiving substantial artillery fire. During the fighting around Amiens, artillery accounted for a large number of casualties on both sides. In fact, field guns and heavy weapons caused most of the battle casualties suffered throughout World War I.

## ALLIED THRUST FORWARD

A long column of Australian troops and artillerymen deploys near the village of Villers-Bretonneux as the Battle of Amiens takes shape. The Allied offensive involved British, Australian, Canadian, French and American troops. Artist Septimus Power, a New Zealander, was employed by the Australian government to document the war.

**“ON 8 AUGUST 1918, THE GERMAN ARMY  
LOST MORE TERRITORY THAN ON ANY  
OTHER DAY ON THE WESTERN FRONT”**



Germans early warning of the Allied advance, he ordered artillerymen to plot their targets on maps and initiate a creeping barrage to begin the operation. Further, his initiative brought together the first real combined arms offensive of the war, utilising aircraft, heavy guns and more than 500 tanks – the new and powerful weapons that could finally end years of arduous trench warfare. Perhaps most important, Rawlinson insisted on maintaining absolute secrecy, hoping to leverage the element of surprise. He also authorised the dispatch of phony communiqués to confuse the Germans as to Allied intentions.

The Allied offensive began on the morning of 8 August, as 900 guns opened fire at 4.20am. The Germans were unprepared for an attack of such magnitude, and rapidly began to lose unit cohesion. As British soldiers advanced, enemy troops began to surrender en masse. Less than an hour after the British stepped off, French troops moved forward to the south. Earlier American gains in the vicinity of Belleau

Wood were exploited. By midday on 8 August, Australian and Canadian troops had advanced five miles. The British pushed relentlessly through rougher terrain, but also made substantial gains. The front line was, according to plan, extended fully eight miles in roughly 24 hours. On 8 August 1918, the German Army lost more territory than on any other day on the Western Front. As darkness fell, Allied soldiers had inflicted 27,000 casualties and taken 12,000 prisoners. The Battle of Amiens ended three days later as Allied momentum slowed substantially and Rawlinson consolidated hard-won gains. By then, approximately 50,000 German soldiers had been captured. The stage was set for further offensive operations known as the 'Hundred Days Campaign', finally compelling Germany to surrender.

In the wake of the capture of thousands of soldiers, General Ludendorff called the decisive 8 August battle at Amiens "the black day of the German army."

## OBSERVATION BALLOONS ALOFT

Often heavily defended and ringed with anti-aircraft guns, observation balloons were deployed to provide intelligence on enemy dispositions, along with tethered barrage balloons floating above the battlefield of Amiens near Villers-Bretonneux. Both sides utilised barrage balloons to prevent low-flying enemy aircraft from strafing troop concentrations, dropping bombs and conducting reconnaissance missions.

## ARMOUR FORGES AHEAD

The gathering of British tanks during the Battle of Amiens was one of the largest concentrations of armoured fighting vehicles during World War I. Heavier Allied tanks took on enemy strongpoints and blasted breaches in German lines, while light tanks exploited breakthroughs, dashing towards enemy rear areas.

## ADVANCE ON VILLERS-BRETONNEUX

The last major German offensive of World War I in the spring of 1918 had been stopped short of the town of Amiens near Villers-Bretonneux. During the British-led advance that followed that summer, Villers-Bretonneux was again in the midst of savage fighting.

## HAULING HEAVY GUNS

Despite the continuing mechanisation of modern armies during World War I, opposing forces remained largely dependent on horses for the transportation of supplies and positioning of artillery. Such was the case at Amiens. Cavalry units continued to operate, even though technological advances in weaponry rapidly rendered their colourful charges obsolete.





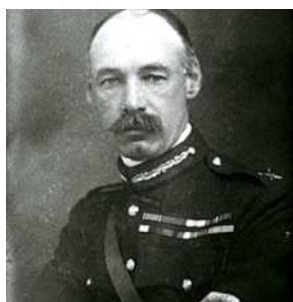
## BRITISH 4TH ARMY

**TROOPS** 75,000

**TANKS** 532

**AIRCRAFT** 800

**ARTILLERY** 2,000



### GENERAL HENRY RAWLINSON

#### LEADER

After learning hard lessons during the Battle of the Somme, Rawlinson displayed remarkable skill in planning and executing the Amiens attack.

**Strength:** Superb organisational skills, particularly in combined arms tactics.

**Weaknesses:** Inability to sustain offensive momentum.



### 2ND AUSTRALIAN DIVISION

#### KEY UNIT

Attacking alongside the 3rd Australian Division, these troops reached their early objective, the green line, by 7am.

**Strength:** Veterans with a reputation as outstanding shock troops.

**Weakness:** Minimal experience in combined operations involving the use of armour.



### MARK V HEAVY TANK

#### KEY WEAPON

The Mark V 'Male' tank mounted two 6-pounder guns and four .303-inch machine guns; a 'Female' variant mounted six machine guns.

**Strengths:** Armour protection and decisive firepower.

**Weaknesses:** Lack of speed and difficulty manoeuvring in unfavourable terrain.

## 01 POISED TO STRIKE

On 8 August 1918, General Henry Rawlinson, commander of the British Fourth Army, launched British, Canadian and Australian troops against the Germans east of Amiens in northern France. Then 45 minutes later, French forces attacked in the south. The Germans had occupied their weak defensive positions only since March. Three objective lines were identified at intervals to mark the assault's progress, and each of these was achieved with relatively rapid success.

## 02 DEALING IN DECEPTION

General Rawlinson conceals the Allied build-up prior to the battle as much as possible, sending false messages for the Germans to intercept, masking troop movements under cover of darkness, and having a pair of aircraft flown above the lines so that their engines cover the sounds of tanks moving into position.

## 03 ALLIED FORCES FORWARD

The battle begins at 4.20am, 8 August 1918, as a creeping artillery barrage falls on German positions in the paths of the Australian and Canadian troops spearheading the advance.

## 04 SURPRISE IS COMPLETE

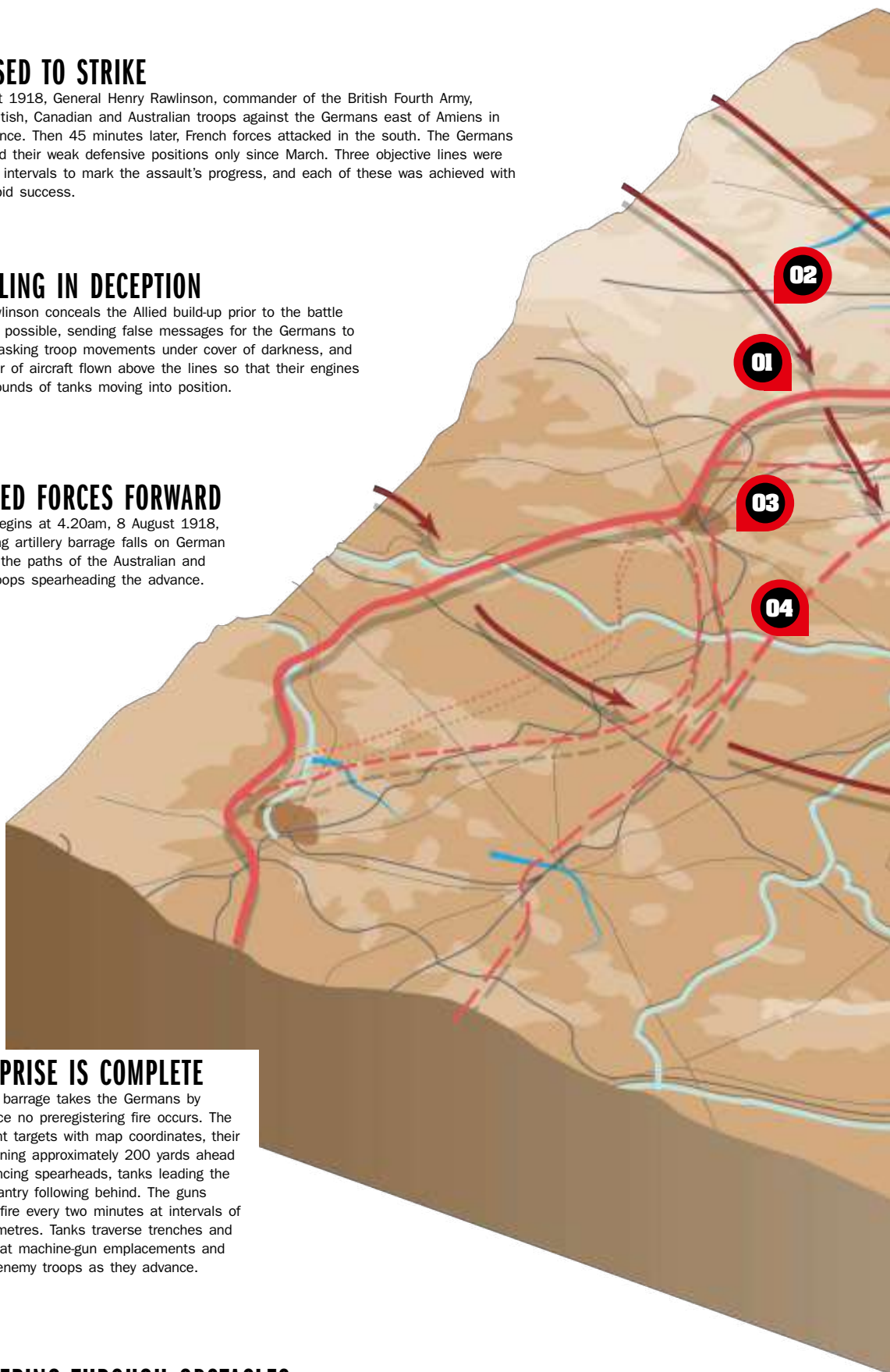
The artillery barrage takes the Germans by surprise since no preregistering fire occurs. The guns pinpoint targets with map coordinates, their shells remaining approximately 200 yards ahead of the advancing spearheads, tanks leading the way with infantry following behind. The guns adjust their fire every two minutes at intervals of roughly 90 metres. Tanks traverse trenches and traps, firing at machine-gun emplacements and clusters of enemy troops as they advance.

## 05 SWEEPING THROUGH OBSTACLES

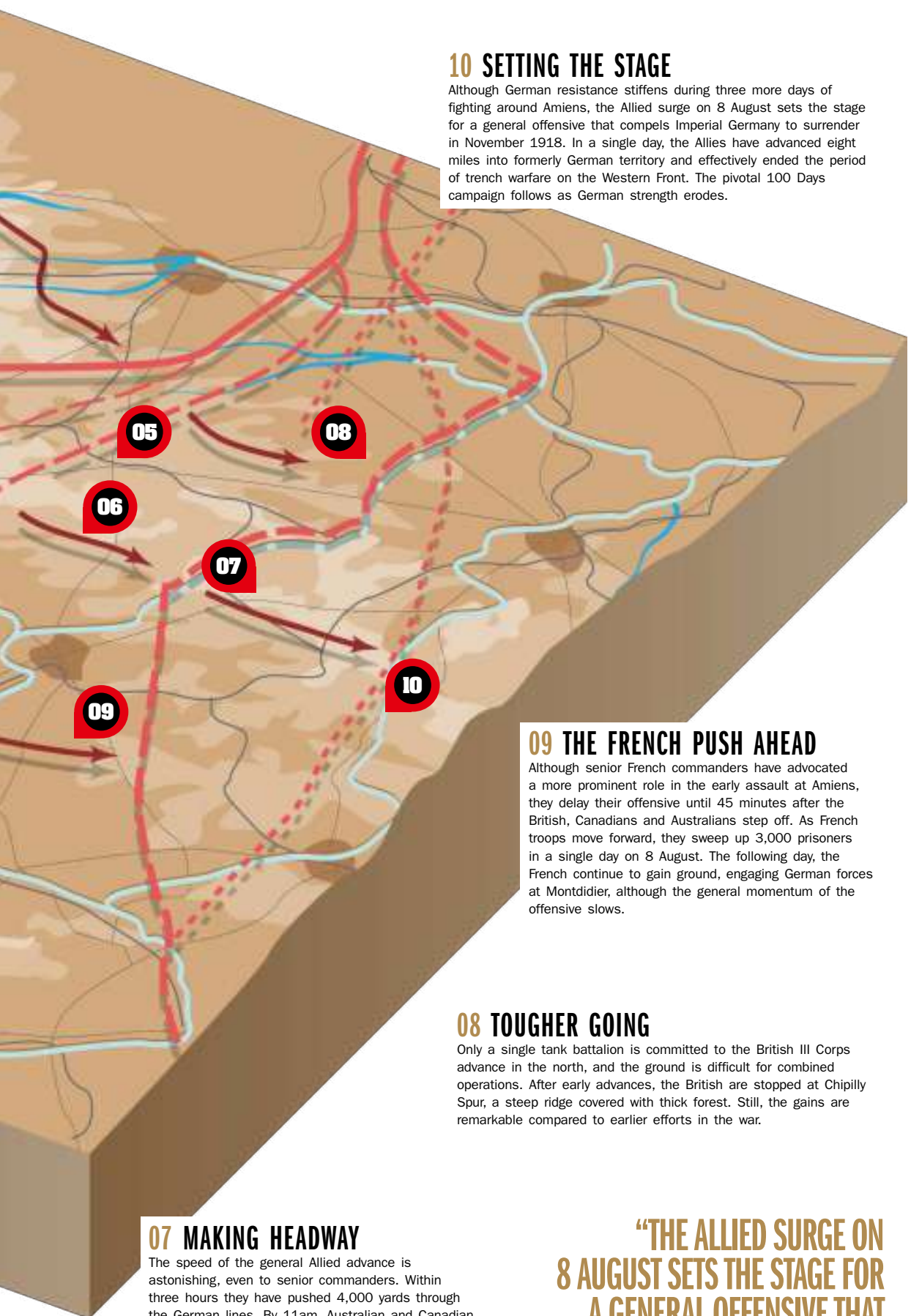
Initial German resistance is light as the tanks create confusion across a 14-mile front. Open terrain in the Canadian and Australian sectors facilitates rapid mechanised movement, while more hilly terrain in the British area impedes the advance somewhat. Many German troops surrender immediately. Others fall back or attempt to resist.

## 06 OBJECTIVES ACHIEVED

The armoured vehicles of the Royal Tank Corps achieve objectives rapidly. By 7.30am, Canadian troops have cleared Germans from an area known as the 'Rifle Wood' or 'Dodo Wood'.







## 10 SETTING THE STAGE

Although German resistance stiffens during three more days of fighting around Amiens, the Allied surge on 8 August sets the stage for a general offensive that compels Imperial Germany to surrender in November 1918. In a single day, the Allies have advanced eight miles into formerly German territory and effectively ended the period of trench warfare on the Western Front. The pivotal 100 Days campaign follows as German strength erodes.

## 09 THE FRENCH PUSH AHEAD

Although senior French commanders have advocated a more prominent role in the early assault at Amiens, they delay their offensive until 45 minutes after the British, Canadians and Australians step off. As French troops move forward, they sweep up 3,000 prisoners in a single day on 8 August. The following day, the French continue to gain ground, engaging German forces at Montdidier, although the general momentum of the offensive slows.

## 08 TOUGHER GOING

Only a single tank battalion is committed to the British III Corps advance in the north, and the ground is difficult for combined operations. After early advances, the British are stopped at Chipilly Spur, a steep ridge covered with thick forest. Still, the gains are remarkable compared to earlier efforts in the war.

## 07 MAKING HEADWAY

The speed of the general Allied advance is astonishing, even to senior commanders. Within three hours they have pushed 4,000 yards through the German lines. By 11am, Australian and Canadian troops have advanced more than three miles, while the British in the north and the French in the south are also making progress. Before noon, more than 400 German guns have fallen into Allied hands and the number of prisoners grows steadily.

**“THE ALLIED SURGE ON 8 AUGUST SETS THE STAGE FOR A GENERAL OFFENSIVE THAT COMPELS IMPERIAL GERMANY TO SURRENDER IN NOVEMBER 1918”**



## GERMAN 2ND ARMY

**TROOPS** 37,000

**TANKS** 0

**AIRCRAFT** 369

**ARTILLERY** 530



## GENERAL GEORG VON DER MARWITZ

### LEADER

General von der Marwitz faced a difficult task at Amiens with understrength divisions that had limited time to prepare defences.

**Strength:** Experienced in combat command of large units.

**Weakness:** Failure to detect the Allied build-up prior to the battle.



## 27TH DIVISION

### KEY UNIT

Prior to Amiens, the 27th Division had fought at the Somme and Arras, and during the German spring offensive of 1918.

**Strength:** Combat veterans with experience in both offensive and defensive operations.

**Weakness:** Well understrength after numerous engagements and lack of replacements.



## 7.7CM FK 96 N.A.

### KEY WEAPON

A widely used German field gun, direct fire from the FK 96 was an effective method of stopping Allied tanks.

**Strengths:** Mobility and ease of deployment.

**Weakness:** Limited range compared to similar Allied field guns.



1918

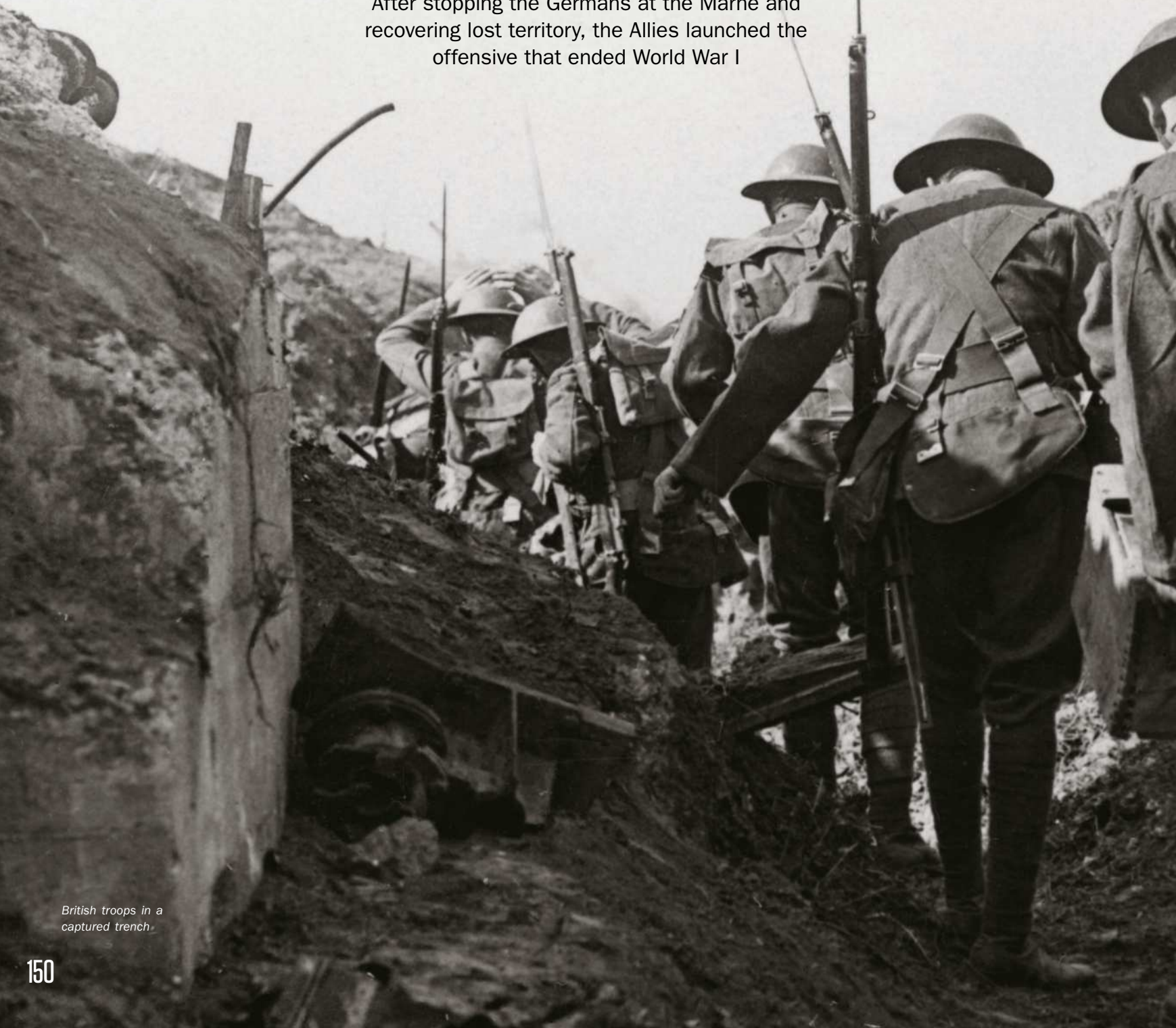
# HUNDRED DAYS OFFENSIVE

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**8 AUGUST - 11 NOVEMBER 1918**

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After stopping the Germans at the Marne and recovering lost territory, the Allies launched the offensive that ended World War I



*British troops in a captured trench*



**W**ith its failed spring attacks in 1918, the German Army had shot its offensive bolt. The horrific casualties sustained were irreplaceable, and

shortages of supplies crippled its capacity to wage war. At home, the German people were restive, experiencing privations as long lists of dead and wounded seemed only to be lengthening in the shadow of defeat.

Three weeks after their victory at the Second Battle of the Marne, the Allies launched their own offensive, which would carry them to victory and end the bloodletting of World War I on 11 November 1918. This final push, initiated on 8 August, became known as the Hundred Days Offensive. Rather than a single action, it is better described as a series of battles that drove the Germans out of France, across land they had controlled since 1914, and through the defenses of the Hindenburg Line.

For the Allies the time was right to strike the fatal blow. American troops were deployed on the European continent in strength, and French Marshal Ferdinand Foch seized the initiative. On the 8 August, the British Fourth Army attacked at Amiens, the troops supported by more than 450 tanks. The German front was cracked on the first day; six divisions disintegrated, and 13,000 prisoners were taken along with 400 artillery pieces in a penetration of 11 kilometres (seven miles). The French advance was sluggish but notable at five kilometres (three miles). German General Erich Ludendorff proclaimed this the “black day of the German Army.” His troubles were just beginning.

Although the Allied onslaught around Amiens had made substantial gains it slowed within four days, and the focus of operations shifted southward where the French Third Army captured Montdidier on 10 August as the Germans retreated. Eight days later, the French had taken 8,000 prisoners and reached Noyon.

The British followed with an assault by Third Army on a 16-kilometre (ten-mile) sector between Albert and Arras. During the Battle of Bapaume, they retook Albert on 22 August, and within a week the British Fourth Army joined the effort. On the 26th, the British First Army rolled forward on the Arras-Cambrai Road. Australian troops crossed the River Somme and occupied Péronne by 2 September, while Canadian and British troops broke through German lines on a front from Drocourt to Quéant, a distance of eight kilometres (five miles).

The Hindenburg Line had been breached in one of its strongest sectors. German positions to the north were outflanked, and when these were abandoned the front was shortened 80 kilometres (50 miles). In this area, the defenders lost more than 225,000 casualties.

On 12 September, American troops executed their first independent major operation of the Great War, assaulting the St Mihiel Salient and

rapidly reaching their objectives. The Americans scooped up 8,000 prisoners in two days. They were not allowed to continue their advance, shifting to join the Argonne Offensive, which was poorly planned and executed in several ways, including an overabundance of available troops and transportation problems. Foul weather further complicated the effort that was bloody and slow. When hostilities ceased weeks later, the French Fourth Army and American First Army were near the city of Sedan.

By late September the fighting focused around Cambrai, where the British First and Third Armies had been bolstered by Australian troops and the American II Corps. The Allies fractured the Hindenburg Line between Cambrai and St Quentin before the offensive halted in early October. Meanwhile, to the north the British Second Army and Belgian soldiers took Messines and surrounding high ground in the two-day Fourth Battle of Ypres. On the second day, these forces reached the outskirts of Cambrai. The Hindenburg Line was a shambles.

Elsewhere, the situation deteriorated rapidly for the Central Powers. On 15 August, Austria-Hungary had essentially asked for a separate peace, while Allied operations in the Balkans, Greece and Palestine brought more victories. Two Turkish armies were destroyed in September, and Bulgaria signed an armistice.

While his own armies were losing 230,000 casualties in the month of September, Ludendorff suffered from severe fatigue and emotional distress. He resigned amid widespread criticism. Kaiser Wilhelm II told Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg that he had to hold the German Army together. But it was no use. The high command had been clamouring for an armistice since August.

Through diplomatic channels the Germans sought an end to the war. The killing continued needlessly until the guns fell silent on 11 November. Difficult negotiations that led to the Treaty of Versailles and a difficult peace followed.



Trench warfare on the Hindenburg Line, Bellicourt, France, World War I, 1917-1918



# BATTLE OF MEGIDDO

19-25 SEPTEMBER 1918

**F**ought across areas of present-day Israel, Syria and Jordan, this battleground has been the scene of numerous other conflicts and is, according to the Bible, the location of the final battle between good and evil, Armageddon. In 1918, the action at Megiddo proved critical in knocking the Ottoman Empire out of World War I.

The Egyptian Expeditionary Force under command of General Sir Edmund Allenby had pushed forward to claim Jerusalem in December 1917. The German spring offensive of 1918 on the Western Front, however, pulled many of Allenby's experienced troops back to Europe. While replacements arrived, his force – consisting of British and Empire troops from Australia, New Zealand, India and South Africa, plus French and, significantly, Arab units – was not ready to advance again until September.

Opposing Allenby was German General Otto Liman von Sanders. He had successfully organised resistance at Gallipoli earlier in the war and was tasked with repeating the trick commanding Ottoman and German forces in Palestine. They were dug in across a line just south of Arsuf on the Mediterranean coast stretching to the northern tip of the Dead Sea, then east of the River Jordan to Amman on the Hejaz Railway. Yet von Sanders' men were in poor condition, weary and ill-provisioned. They were also heavily outnumbered.

In contrast, Allenby could call upon fit, well-supplied soldiers with superior weaponry. He had a massive cavalry advantage, something he planned to exploit to the full, plus two other military cards in play. The first was a loose, changing, yet nevertheless effective coalition of Arab tribes in revolt against their Ottoman

overlords, marshalled by an Englishman attached to the intelligence section of the British Army, TE Lawrence. Allenby gave Lawrence money, arms and virtually a free hand to wage a guerrilla campaign of harassment and disruption with his highly mobile desert force. Frequently operating deep behind enemy lines, Lawrence's Arab irregulars particularly wrought havoc upon supply lines along the Hejaz Railway.

Allenby's second key advantage was air supremacy. The RAF, officially active from April 1918, ruled the skies over the region. It had better planes, and more of them, meaning enemy air reconnaissance of Allied forces was practically non-existent. Crucially, this allowed Allenby to mass forces on his left flank in secret. Troops only moved along the front at night, while there were some extraordinary ploys used to fool the enemy into thinking cavalry units were still in position in the Jordan Valley, where the Ottoman command believed the attack would come. Fake camps consisting of rows of dummy horses made of wood and canvas were set up. Even bivouac fires were lit at night in these fake camps, while mules pulling sleighs were walked continuously during the day to create dust clouds indicative of intense pre-attack activity.

Allenby's plan to utilise surprise, the speed of the cavalry and the bombing power of the RAF to augment his infantry had strong parallels to the Blitzkrieg tactics used by Nazi Germany at the beginning of World War II. The outcome was certainly as devastating, with Ottoman military power effectively destroyed in a matter of days. Boldly planned and effectively executed, the Megiddo offensive was one of the most decisive of World War I.

## HORSEMEN ON THE MOVE

In what was to become the last great cavalry charge in warfare, Allenby's Desert Mounted Corps swept through the Ottoman line – torn apart by artillery and infantry – soon after the offensive began on 19 September. The open, unguarded Plains of Sharon and Esdraelon lay invitingly ahead.





## OBJECTIVE IN SIGHT

The 4th Cavalry Division cut through the Musmus Pass near the high mound of Megiddo to approach the strategic railway town, El Afule. At its head were the 2nd Lancers, an Indian unit, indicative of the international nature of the EEF. They came under fire – the first serious resistance encountered.

**“ALLENBY GAVE LAWRENCE MONEY, ARMS AND VIRTUALLY A FREE HAND TO WAGE A GUERRILLA CAMPAIGN OF HARASSMENT AND DISRUPTION WITH HIS HIGHLY MOBILE DESERT FORCE”**

## ROUTED

The Ottomans fought to hold the town, initially repelling a frontal attack. However, the static defenders were up against swiftly mobile adversaries. A looping charge brought a mounted squadron into the enemy's exposed flank. The resulting rout was symptomatic of the campaign – war-weary Ottomans outnumbered and outmanoeuvred by fresher opponents.

## DEFEAT ASSURED

With close to 50 enemy killed and over 450 captured, the cavalry pushed on to take El Afule barely 24 hours after riding through the enemy front line. Beisan followed shortly after, cutting off any northern retreat for the Ottoman armies in the Judean Hills, and effectively sealing their fate.





## ALLIED EGYPTIAN EXPEDITIONARY FORCE

### TROOPS

57,000 INFANTRY

12,000 CAVALRY

ARTILLERY 550



## GENERAL SIR EDMUND ALLENBY

### LEADER

Tall, imposing, tactically astute field commander, known as 'Bull'. Given the command after disagreement with Haig on the Western Front.

**STRENGTHS:** Visible, 'front-line' general able to control his international force.

**WEAKNESS:** An abrupt, brusque manner, possibly adopted to mask shyness.



## PALESTINE BRIGADE RAF

### KEY UNIT

Consisting of British and Australian pilots who played a pivotal role in Allenby's attack plans.

**STRENGTH:** Possessed advanced flying machines of greater speed and climbing power.

**WEAKNESS:** Aviation was young – planes were as dangerous as the enemy.



## HANDLEY PAGE HEAVY BOMBER

### KEY WEAPON

Twin-engined aircraft with massive wing-span. Lawrence's Arabs danced around it in joy when it arrived in their sector.

**STRENGTHS:** Powerful long-range biplane able to drop six 100lb (45kg) bombs.

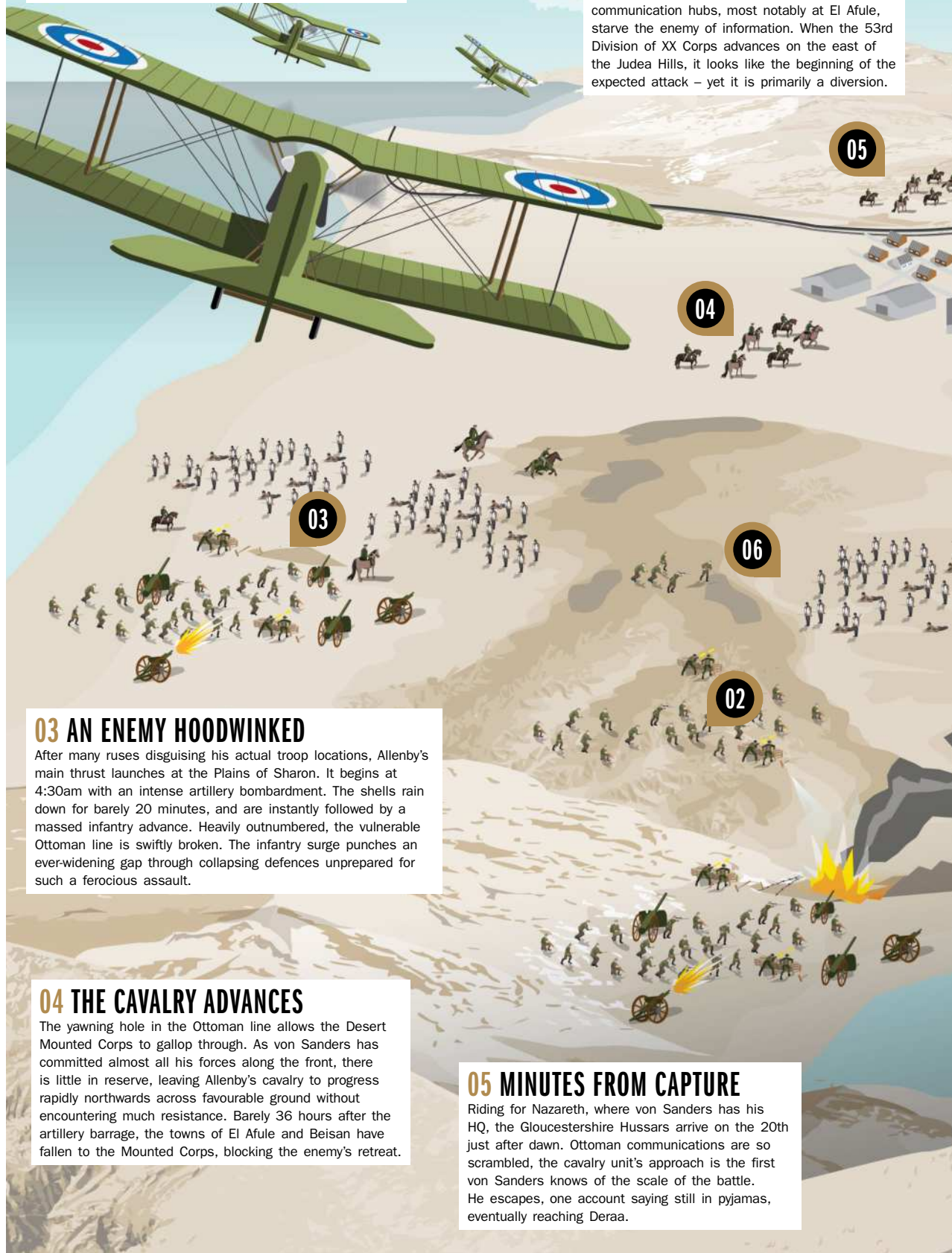
**WEAKNESS:** Sheer size made it an easy target for enemy fire.

## 01 UNLEASHING SABOTAGE

Orchestrated by TE Lawrence, Arab irregulars raid key rail routes around Deraa. Liman von Sanders reinforces east of the River Jordan, believing it will be the focus of Allenby's attack.

## 02 CONFUSION AND DIVERSION

Bombing raids by the RAF on Ottoman communication hubs, most notably at El Afule, starve the enemy of information. When the 53rd Division of XX Corps advances on the east of the Judea Hills, it looks like the beginning of the expected attack – yet it is primarily a diversion.



## 03 AN ENEMY HOODWINKED

After many ruses disguising his actual troop locations, Allenby's main thrust launches at the Plains of Sharon. It begins at 4:30am with an intense artillery bombardment. The shells rain down for barely 20 minutes, and are instantly followed by a massed infantry advance. Heavily outnumbered, the vulnerable Ottoman line is swiftly broken. The infantry surge punches an ever-widening gap through collapsing defences unprepared for such a ferocious assault.

## 04 THE CAVALRY ADVANCES

The yawning hole in the Ottoman line allows the Desert Mounted Corps to gallop through. As von Sanders has committed almost all his forces along the front, there is little in reserve, leaving Allenby's cavalry to progress rapidly northwards across favourable ground without encountering much resistance. Barely 36 hours after the artillery barrage, the towns of El Afule and Beisan have fallen to the Mounted Corps, blocking the enemy's retreat.

## 05 MINUTES FROM CAPTURE

Riding for Nazareth, where von Sanders has his HQ, the Gloucestershire Hussars arrive on the 20th just after dawn. Ottoman communications are so scrambled, the cavalry unit's approach is the first von Sanders knows of the scale of the battle. He escapes, one account saying still in pyjamas, eventually reaching Deraa.





## OTTOMAN YILDIRIM ARMY GROUP

### TROOPS

32,000 INFANTRY

2,000 CAVALRY

ARTILLERY 400



## GENERAL OTTO LIMAN VON SANDERS

### LEADER

Prussian military careerist who helped to revamp Ottoman armed forces after their setbacks during the Balkan Wars.

**STRENGTH:** Success in defending Gallipoli engendered confidence in his methods.

**WEAKNESS:** Committed forces to his front line, leaving little in reserve.



## ASIA CORPS

### KEY UNIT

Combined German and Ottoman unit, which offered stiff rearguard resistance at Samakh on the shore of the Sea of Galilee.

**STRENGTH:** Fought determinedly to hold up Allied advances beyond the town.

**WEAKNESS:** Lack of numbers, inevitably resulting in being overwhelmed.



## MG08 MACHINE GUN

### KEY WEAPON

A water-cooled, short barrel recoil machine gun unleashing 500 rounds per minute from 250-round fabric belts.

**STRENGTH:** Rapid firing in the face of a cavalry charge.

**WEAKNESS:** Of little use once the fighting became hand-to-hand.

## 10 ENDGAME FOR THE OTTOMANS

The ragtag remnants of three routed armies fall back towards Damascus but there is no respite from the harrying allied pursuers. The city is captured on 1st October, a prelude to hostilities ceasing when the Armistice of Mudros is signed later that month, ending Ottoman involvement in World War I.

## 09 DERA A FALLS

A defensive stand at Deraa becomes impossible when its airstrip and German planes are wrecked by bombs from Allied aircraft. The town is abandoned to Arab rebels as the Ottomans flee.

## 08 ADVANCES EAST OF THE JORDAN

Major General Chaytor is tasked with protecting the Allied right flank. His mounted infantry force of some 11,000 men advance when it is clear that Ottoman communications are too disrupted to organise a counter-attack. Instead, the Ottoman 4th Army hastily retreats, ordered back by von Sanders to his new HQ at Deraa. While the disorganised withdrawal is harried by air strikes and Arab forces, Chaytor captures the key city of Amman.

## 07 CARNAGE ALONG THE ESCAPE ROUTE

Following its initial move, the 53rd Division redeploys to block any eastern Ottoman retreat, but stiff resistance prevents it reaching the Wadi Fara, a route into the Jordan Valley. Mustafa Kemal's force rushes down the narrow gorge, but is seen from above. Allied aircraft bomb and machine-gun the column. Rapidly wrecked vehicles and wagons totally block the road. A massacre ensues, with even some of the aircrews unnerved by the butchery.

## 06 THE 8TH ARMY DISINTEGRATES

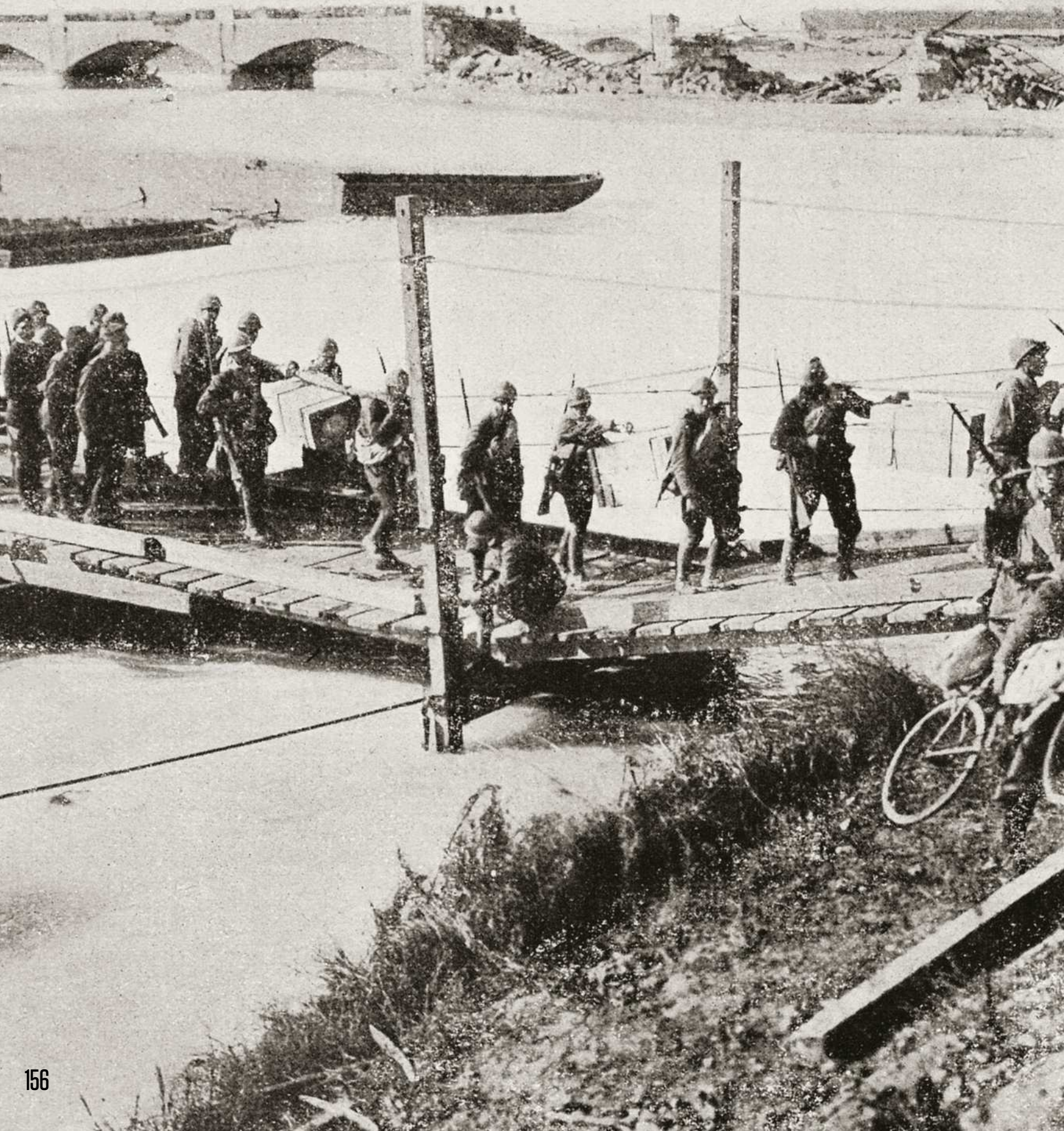
The Allied infantry continues to advance on the Ottoman 8th Army, while its northerly retreat route is blocked by the rapid cavalry advance. Practically encircled, it is further harried by RAF raids. With many men killed, captured or fleeing the battlefield, effective resistance subsides, leaving the 7th Army commanded by Mustafa Kemal (the future Turkish leader) desperately exposed. There is one avenue of retreat – east into the Jordan Valley.





1918

*Near the end of their victorious  
offensive on 3 November 3 1918,  
Italian soldiers cross the River  
Piave on a footbridge*





# VITTORIO VENETO

24 OCTOBER – 4 NOVEMBER 1918

The final offensive of the Italian Army in World War I solidified territorial claims and assured the end of the Austro-Hungarian Empire

In the spring of 1918, the Italian and Austro-Hungarian armies faced each other – roughly equal in strength – along a front in northern Italy in the vicinity of the Piave River and mountainous country east of Lake Garda. While the great drama of the German offensives got underway on the Western Front, the primary belligerents on both sides urged their allies to begin similar operations on this secondary front as well.

For Austria-Hungary, its army recently weakened by the transfer of German troops to the Western Front for General Erich Ludendorff's maximum effort, support for Germany was a given. The senior partner among the Central Powers demanded a second offensive to spread Allied resources as thinly as possible. But the Austro-Hungarian Empire itself was teetering on the verge of collapse. Growing separatist movements threatened to splinter the empire into independent nation states, and any failure of its army in the field might hasten the empire's doom.

The Italian Army, its commanders wary of beginning an offensive before their forces were fully prepared, was also prodded by the British and French to take action. The Italians were still reeling from the loss of 300,000 dead and wounded in the Battle of Caporetto a year earlier, while shortages plagued both armies.

However, should the Italians strike successfully the victory would validate the nation's participation in the Allied cause and assure a place at the negotiating table when the terms of a favourable peace were concluded. Territorial concessions could be won, and Italian prestige would soar.

Both sides set to planning for renewed action, and the Austro-Hungarians attacked first. A two-pronged offensive was launched on 15 June, with one army assigned to break through the Italian lines in the mountains and push toward Castelfranco and Verona while two others crossed the Piave. A subsequent linkup would force a general Italian retreat, opening the way south to

Venice on the Adriatic Sea. One glaring flaw in the plan, however, was the simple fact that the two thrusts were distant from one another, incapable of offering mutual support.

The Austro-Hungarian offensive was a dismal failure. The attack through the mountains was stymied on its first day. The other armies managed to bridge the Piave in five locations and made modest gains during the first 72 hours, but the advance was costly, and reserve troops were already being depleted. The Austro-Hungarian high command lost heart and ordered a withdrawal across the Piave a week after the offensive had begun. The Italians chose not to vigorously pursue the retreating enemy. The Austro-Hungarians had found only misery; casualties were appalling with nearly 12,000 killed, 81,000 wounded and 26,000 soldiers taken prisoner. Following the defeat, the pace of desertion accelerated, and many soldiers of the empire simply walked away from their posts.

Austria-Hungary itself began to disintegrate. On 6 October 1918, the nation of Yugoslavia was proclaimed, and eight days later a new government was formed in an independent Czechoslovakia. Bulgaria had concluded an armistice on 30 September. When Emperor Charles I declared that he would no longer participate in the affairs of government, although he refused to abdicate, the path toward dissolution of the empire was clear.

For the Italians, any cessation of hostilities with the opposing armies occupying their current lines would compromise territorial gains and relegate the government of Prime Minister Vittorio Orlando to a bit player in any peace negotiations. With a renewed sense of urgency, Italian supreme commander General Armando Diaz reorganised his forces and planned an offensive in two tactically prominent areas, the heights of Monte Grappa and the lower Piave near the Adriatic shore from west to east.

Diaz was deliberate in his preparation. The Allied forces in the region included 51 Italian combat divisions along with three British, two French and





## ARDITI ELITE

Early special forces of the Italian Army performed heroically during the crossing of the Piave River in 1918

When the Italian Army crossed the Piave River during its decisive offensive in the winter of 1918, the elite Arditi were instrumental in paving the way to victory. Formed in 1914 when the Italian military establishment decreed that elite units should be constituted, the Arditi took their name from the word 'ardire', meaning 'to dare', and the loose translation to English results in 'The Daring Ones'. Training was rigorous, and by late 1918 there were 27 active Arditi units with more than 18,000 men serving.

During the offensive that led to the Battle of Vittorio Veneto, the Italian Army's crossing of the rain-swollen Piave was a decisive moment. The Arditi were employed as shock troops charged with swimming the river and engaging Austro-Hungarian soldiers defending positions on the far bank. They did so with daggers clenched between their teeth, and their exploits earned them the nickname of the 'Caimans of the Piave.'

In 1920, the Arditi units were disbanded, but their esprit de corps lives on within the Italian armed forces today. Later, the Arditi name became associated with the fascist Black Shirts who followed Benito Mussolini to power in 1922 and later plunged the nation into World War II.

A group of elite Italian Arditi celebrate their victory in the winter offensive of 1918 against the Austro-Hungarian Army



An Italian cavalry patrol arrives in a village during reconnaissance operations preceding a general infantry advance

one Czech division, as well as the 332nd Infantry Regiment of the US Army. The plan involved an attack by the Fourth Army on Monte Grappa and the Eighth Army across the Piave, with the objective of encircling the Austro-Hungarian Sixth Army. Three additional Allied armies would be poised to support the operation and exploit any advantage gained.

The Italian offensive got underway on the night of 23 October, with the British divisions of the Tenth Army making the most significant progress ahead of the main assaults that began at dawn on the following day. The British established bridgeheads over the Piave despite the fact that it was near flood stage after heavy rains.

Field Marshal Lord Cavan sent his troops across the Piave in an area where several small islands were clustered. British troops of the Royal Welch Fusiliers and Honourable Artillery Company, which was actually an infantry battalion, seized the northern half of the largest island, Papadopoli, while Italians of the 11th Corps captured the southern half. The preferred weapon during the British assault was the bayonet, taking advantage of the element of surprise.

Before the Sun rose, Italian artillery began pounding enemy positions around Monte Grappa. Infantrymen started the painfully slow ascent of the mountain massif in the face of Austro-Hungarian fire. Meanwhile, the flooding Piave prevented the three armies assigned to that sector from attacking in concert. Only one of them could move forward as planned, but Lord Cavan's command managed to cross the river and establish a modest bridgehead by 27 October, capturing 3,500 prisoners and 54 field guns.

The Italian Tenth Army extended its penetration of enemy lines across the Piave to a perimeter eight kilometres (five miles) wide and four kilometres (2.5 miles) deep, and as its forward movement resumed, reserve troops swiftly crossed the river in support.

When the Austro-Hungarian commander, General Svetozar Boroevic von Bojna, realised that the Italians were overextended and vulnerable he ordered an immediate counterattack. Morale had hit rock bottom though, and many of his soldiers simply refused to obey their officers' orders. The counterattack fizzled out before it began, and it





*Italian soldiers climb an embankment after crossing the River Piave during their winter advance in 1918*

## “AUSTRO-HUNGARIAN MORALE HAD HIT ROCK BOTTOM, AND MANY SOLDIERS SIMPLY REFUSED TO OBEY THEIR OFFICERS’ ORDERS”

was soon to be followed by Austria-Hungary, with political infighting erupting in the aftermath of failures on the battlefield.

In the midst of the Italian offensive on 28 October, Bohemia declared its independence. At the end of the month, Hungary withdrew from its union with Austria, and by then the army in the field had begun executing a general withdrawal, its troops fighting for an empire that no longer existed.

Lancers and elite Bersaglieri bicycle troops of the Italian Eighth Army entered the town of Vittorio Veneto on 30 October and moved on to the banks of the Tagliamento River. On the Piave front, the Italian Twelfth Army advanced on the left flank of the Eighth Army. The Third Army crossed the lower Piave, and its probing attacks along the edge of the mountain range revealed that the Austro-Hungarians were possibly beginning to pull back.

A first light on 31 October, the Italian Fourth Army redoubled its efforts against the Austro-Hungarian entrenchments at Monte Grappa but made little headway against stout fortifications. Operations in that area were soon suspended.

Elsewhere, the Italian push gained ground steadily as the advance swamped territory around the town of Feltre that the enemy had occupied since early in the war. British and French soldiers of the Sixth Army broke through the enemy defences at Asiago and captured Trento hours ahead of the vanguard of the approaching First Army. These movements gained the gateway to the wide Venetian Plain.

Once the Italians had crossed the Piave in force, the outcome of the offensive was a foregone conclusion. November brought victory after victory. On 1 November, Italian troops marched into Sacile, and on the next day they took the town of Udine. By 3 November the Italians had retaken the old battlefields on the Isonzo River and at Caporetto, scene of a stinging defeat months earlier. On the same day, a naval expedition, including warships and amphibious infantry, seized the famous city of Trieste on the Adriatic.

The Italian offensive had become a debacle of epic proportions for the disorganised, demoralised Austro-Hungarian Army, fighting its last battles as a military entity. The advance was virtually unchecked

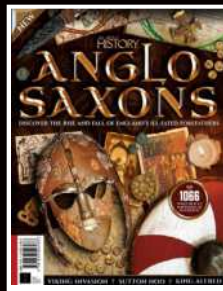
until hostilities ceased. The Italians killed or wounded approximately 30,000 enemy soldiers and rounded up a phenomenal 300,000 prisoners before the offensive halted on 4 November. In sharp contrast, Allied casualties were relatively light. The Italians lost about 37,000 dead and wounded, the British 2,139, and the French fewer than 1,000.

On 3 November, representatives of Italy and the shattered Austro-Hungarian Empire met at the Villa Giusti outside Padua and concluded an armistice. Signed that day, it went into effect on 4 November and ended armed hostilities between the parties on the Italian Front.

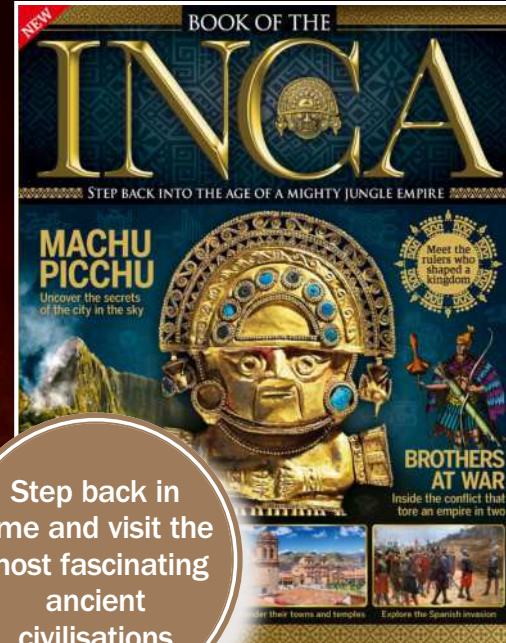
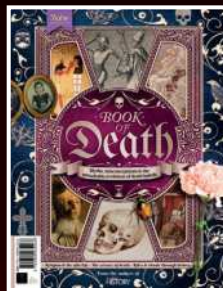
Under the terms of the armistice, Austria-Hungary was required to forfeit all territory it had occupied since August 1914. German forces still active in the region were to leave within two weeks or face internment. Italian forces occupied Austrian territory, including the city of Innsbruck and the North Tyrol.

When the Allied representatives met in Versailles (with the exception of Russia, which had been excluded for signing a separate peace with Germany), Prime Minister Orlando took his place among the principal negotiators. For Italy, where fascism was already on the rise, it was a seat at the table won in the last days of the Great War.

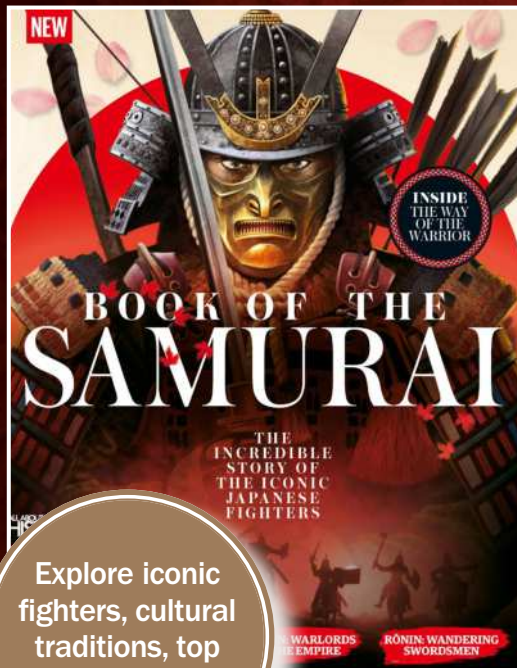
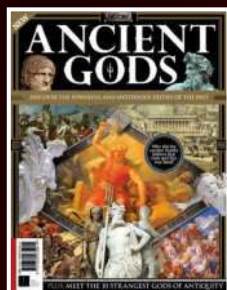
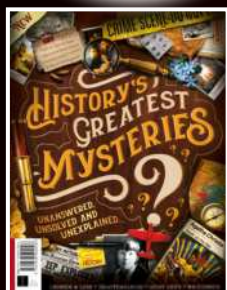




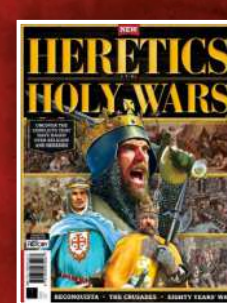
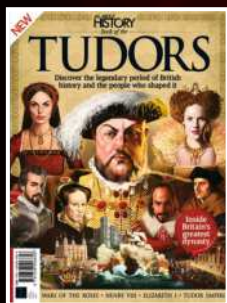
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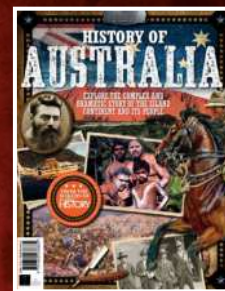
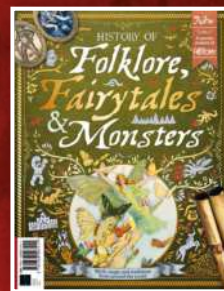
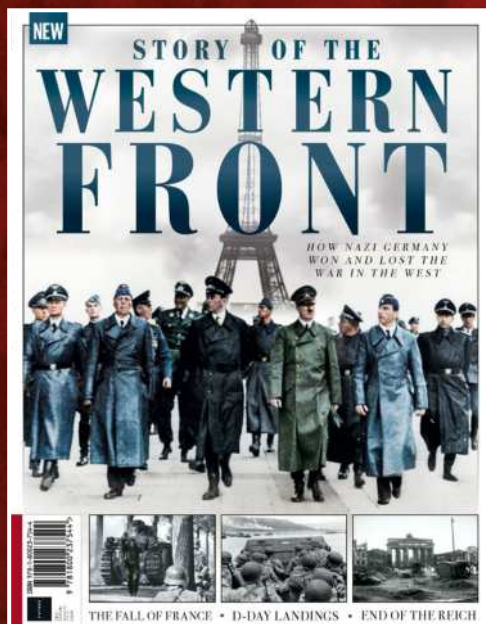
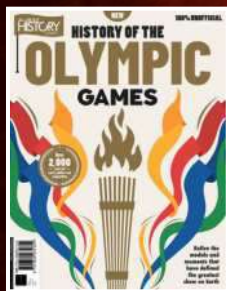


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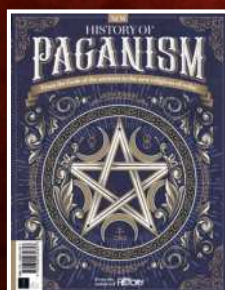
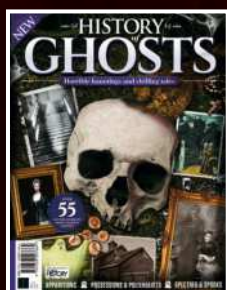
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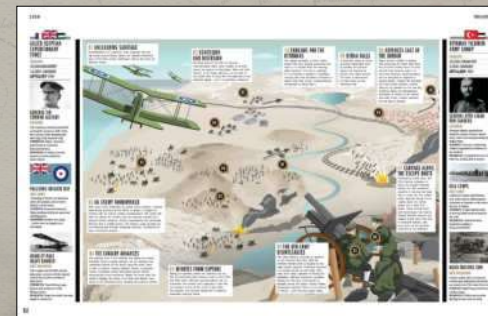
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